

# **A NATION'S VISUAL LANGUAGE: NATION BRANDING AND THE VISUAL IDENTITY OF CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA**

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# ABSTRACT

This research explores the role graphic design can play in the national branding of emergent nations, and takes the multiracial, multicultural state of Malaysia as the principal object of study. Contemporary Malaysian society and culture are reviewed in the context of present views of globalization and postcolonialism, and the phenomenon of 'glocalization' emerges as an important one in Malaysia. A variety of design research methods are used to identify the nature of graphic design practice in Malaysia, including the examination of the national government framework of design practices and networks, the design-led method of cultural probes, and participatory observation within several Malaysian design agencies. A questionnaire survey was also carried out with a sample group of design practitioners and interviews conducted with key professional design practitioners in the country and members of the Malaysia Design Council. These methods reveal that the professional and personal outlook of local designers is highly influenced by government policies and the support systems provided by government departments. The findings lead to reflective practice aimed at developing graphic design processes that enable designers involved in national identity projects to better understand and communicate the required historical and cultural features. The outcome of the reflective practice is *A Nation's Visual Language*, a pilot handbook and *Visual Identity Guide* for Malaysian national branding, which can be further developed by others and adapted to the needs of other emergent nations. A major feature of the reflective process is the testing of the handbook by student designers, and discussion of the results with professional practitioners.

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# **CHAPTER ONE: Introduction**

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## 1.1 Background to the Research

Nation branding is a growing niche in graphic design practice, in which many of the principles and practices found in the promotion of organizations and products are applied to entire countries. The main clients for nation branding are state agencies and governments, but companies can also choose to use perceptions of their home nation, or make appeals to patriotic sentiment in their domestic market to enhance their own product marketing campaigns. Nation branding can be used to help manage both the internal and external perception of a country using all the following means: a) promoting its unique characteristics, b) promoting its products and services, c) publicizing its trading profile, and d) fostering the sense of identity and belonging among its citizens and organizations that its government would like to develop. Since governments and state agencies frequently change and commerce continuously evolves, nation-branding projects are usually part of an on-going series of campaigns in which the graphic design components are often supporting a government agency's current press and public relations (PR) activities as well as its policy initiatives.

Leading individual experts in the field are Wally Olins and Simon Anholt, and leading international specialist international agencies are AMEA Market Intelligences, which was created as a 'platform to combine the key aspects that effectively project a country brand' (AMEA Market Intelligence Group, 2011) and Axelera Group: The Country Brand Catalyst, which "develops approaches to formulate a competitive identity" (Axelera Group, 2009) as well as creating local or governmental identities. These experts work for many different nations and therefore nation branding is not an activity specific to any one nation, and should be seen more as an international marketing approach that can be applied to a great variety of different nations. National governments then look to this

common process to create and maintain a positive identity for their state's values, institutions and businesses, which can be well understood both internally and externally, particularly in respect of promoting the nation's commercial competitiveness. The methods for building a nation brand have evolved in a global economy where the outsourcing of many forms of manufacturing and service provision has helped develop increasingly complex international connectivity, rapid commercial development in previously insignificant national economies, and ever-denser networks of connections and interdependencies. Friedman (2006) has characterized this process of levelling and spreading as 'the world is flat' phenomenon. Radzi (2009) has further discussed the way in which global and levelling technologies such as the Internet now make it possible and necessary to develop, refine and grow a nation brand that can operate in markets that are no longer merely regional, but increasingly global.

In the 21st century, when globalization is a pervasive notion of how societies and economies are developing (Khondker, 2004), global competition between nations has intensified as businesses and investors search for new regions in which to both relocate their operations and develop new markets. In this context, countries that were once relatively isolated are now challenged to strategically improve their 'brand' image, often motivated by economic factors such as foreign investment, developing the export market, and attracting tourists and skilled migrants. It is particularly challenging for emerging nations to develop or to 'rebrand' their country's image because much of their traditional heritage has been lost due to factors such as colonization and postcolonial reformation, or restructuring as a result of internal conflicts, as seen in former Yugoslavia. Therefore nation branding is particularly attractive to the governments of emerging nations, but it cannot work in quite the same way as in established nations



because of the loss of identity and heritage that most postcolonial or post-conflict nations have suffered.

Nation branding is not then quite the same activity in established and emerging nations, and this thesis mostly concentrates on nation branding in emerging nations, taking my own country of Malaysia as its principal case study. Malaysia makes a good case study for two main reasons: 1) It is a nation that is managing the effects of both forms of national restructuring following its colonization by the British from 1874 till 1957, and the merging of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia in 1963, and the subsequent secession of Singapore in 1965. 2) During the colonial era Malaysia developed into a multi-ethnic, multicultural society, long before that term became common in developed colonizing nations like the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Therefore many of the issues that are raised in the branding of emergent nations on different continents – such as India, Moldova and Zimbabwe – can all be found in the new, reconfigured, multicultural nation of Malaysia.

Malaysia is still in the early stages of developing a nation brand. As an emerging postcolonial nation, Malaysia needs to demonstrate its identity, positioning itself in a more positive way than before within the global market. Known earlier for its tin, rubber and to a lesser extent oil, which was not intensively drilled until the 1970s, Malaysia evolved significantly in the twentieth century (Radzi, 2009). Since its independence in 1957, the nation has steadily progressed and evolved into one of the leading economies in Southeast Asia. Malaysia is rich in natural resources and its economy is based on agriculture, manufacturing and trade. In this global era, Malaysia has become associated

with knowledge-based industry and has developed a competitive stand upon the global stage. Its engagement with modernity can be symbolized through skyscrapers and mega-projects such as Kuala Lumpur Tower, KLCC Petronas Twin Towers and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). Malaysia is known for its melting pot of races and religions where Malay, Chinese, Indians and many other ethnic groups live together. Politically, Malaysians are portrayed through graphic images in national and local advertising as one nation where all cultures and ethnicities are united. However, racial tensions exist between the communities and in the political scene in this pluralistic society. With continuing debates, the issue of national identity remains unsettled. Thus, the challenges of building Malaysia's brand identity include internal branding as well as positioning it globally as a unique, different and attractive country for tourists, investors, strategic partners, businesses and other stakeholders, as suggested by Radzi (2009) in his article 'Challenges of building the Malaysia nation brand'.

The post-independence Malaysian government has emphasized the role of agriculture, engineering and sciences in building and developing the nation. Thus, the idea of nation branding and national visual identity were not really considered until recently. In addition, graphic design is a relatively new discipline in Malaysia. Graphic Design programmes only began in the 1990s (Kamil Yunus, 1997), and the archives and literature about Malaysian graphic design history are very limited compared to archives and publications about arts and crafts or architecture. Malaysian designers do not have much to reference regarding their own design heritage and roots. As a consequence, many Malaysian designers have been 'borrowing' from designers in other countries for inspiration and example (Kakireka, 2008). Since globalization tends to drive design practices towards internationally common styles and approaches, globalization can be

seen as a force that might actually prevent Malaysian design practitioners from developing a distinctive identity. Globalization then has a direct bearing on the outlook of the designers who emerging nations are using to develop their nation branding. It might be seen to subvert their aspiration to create a unique and authentic identity that does not look as if it has been constructed by foreigners, or pretend to be like other more successful nations.

Malaysia, which aspires to be one of the Asian ‘tiger’ economies, then offers good insight into the tension underlying nation branding, which is to be more like successful competitors, whilst also being different. This tension is something that has led Simon Anholt to actually question the credibility of his own specialization, and ask whether nation branding can ever amount to anything more than a governmental public relations (PR) exercise (Anholt, 2011). One of the first tasks of this research then is to consider what benefits nation branding can have, particularly for those emerging nations which might appear to be most in need of it. Following that, I will be concentrating on what it has to offer my own country of Malaysia. In order to ask that question, I will be investigating the complexities of Malaysia as a multicultural, multiracial and multifaceted country, and investigating the way Malaysian graphic designers think about both their practice and their nation.

The main outcome of this investigation of local designers’ attitudes has been the proposal that graphic designers in emerging nations need some sort of systematic way of analysing and visually expressing their views of the complex issues raised by nation branding activities. Accordingly, my investigation has shifted from using social science

methods to analyse the attitudes of others towards ‘reflective practice’ methods increasingly familiar in art and design research, which involve working with fellow practitioners on collaborative design projects and, in particular, one aimed at creating a national visual identity handbook and guide. The handbook aims to offer its users a series of procedures and exercises that enables them to investigate more interesting and less obvious features of their nation and their views of it. The procedures offered by my pilot Malaysian handbook try to enable users to look objectively at their nation’s history, culture and ambitions. They are intended to be open to refinement and improvement so that local designers can more easily identify their shared heritage and build on it a new legacy to pass on to successive generations. The pilot version of this handbook is presented as part of this thesis, which also reports trials conducted with trainee designers. The lessons learned from these trials are further evaluated to assess if this kind of manual could be more widely useful in nation branding in general.

Another set of findings which may be more specific to Malaysia concerns its government policies on design, which are compared and contrasted with those of other nations such as South Korea and the United Kingdom. These policies have considerable impact on the way in which local businesses view the nature and the benefits of design activity. This research suggests a number of ways in which the Malaysian government could better guide both businesses and designers to promote Malaysian-made products without resorting to clichés, or passing them off as products made elsewhere. By examining the national government framework of design practice and networks in Malaysia, my research will provide discussion and recommendations towards developing a national strategic body for design and implementing comprehensive design policies that will help improve the practice standards among those designers upon whom a strong nation brand

depends. Although the recommendations might appear to be only locally significant, it will be seen that South Korea is very actively pursuing this kind of leadership as part of its government's drive to establish the country as one of the world's leading nations, rather than an Asian follower of a Western success model.

This thesis will then investigate local issues that are not unique to Malaysia, but can be found in many other nations that have ambitions to play a role in leading, rather than following, global developments. In that context, nation branding can be seen as an important expression of that greater ambition which globalization is increasingly forcing upon nations that have been leading a relatively isolated existence.

## 1.2 Limitation of the Research

It is acknowledged that design education and practice are becoming more widespread and popular in the global arena. However, as Woodham (2005) points out, research and publications on graphic design have been geographically dominated by a focus on a comparatively limited number of countries in the industrialized world, in particular the English-speaking cultures of Western society.

Several studies have revealed that there are limited resources and literature available on graphic design history and its practice in Malaysia: Ezrena Marwan (in Birdwatching, 2012) writes, “... *have no vocabulary for design history in this country (Malaysia). History is such a significant component of graphic design, and in Malaysia, history is not even ‘considered’ in the field of graphic design*”, while Kamil Yunus (2007, p.124) claims, “*records of Malaysia’s early design history are threadbare*”. The sources for the literature review in Chapter Two mainly derive from a Western/Eurocentric viewpoint, unless relevant materials from local authors are available. An example is the account of the historical context of graphic design in Malaysia, which is much cited from Kamil Yunus (2007), Yeoh and Redza Piyadasa (2007) and Ezrena Marwan (2010) who have contributed to the literature in the field.

The lack of substantial literature on graphic design in Malaysia allowed this study to contribute to the literature in this field through examining the literature in related fields such as the development of art in Malaysia, analysing visual artefacts available at a fairly young Malaysia Design Archive (online), and conducting primary research. An exploratory study has attempted to obtain information about graphic designers and their

practice through design organizations, listing of organizations, creative agencies and directory of graphic designers.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review**

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## 2.1 Definitions of Graphic Design

The original Greek word *graphikos* can be applied to any form of drawing or mark-making, and therefore there are certain design historians, such as Aynsley (2001), who trace the origins of graphic design back to the earliest known forms of visual communication. Meggs' *History of Graphic Design* (2011), currently in its fifth edition, also traces the roots of graphic design back to cave paintings from Lascaux, dating from c.15,000–10,000 BC, and more particularly to illuminated manuscripts such as the Chi-Rho page in the Book of Kells, c.794–806 CE. Seen in this broad context, graphic design might then be described as one branch of a very broad activity today called 'visual communication', a label that is increasingly popular in degree course titles. However, as Webster's dictionary points out, the term 'graphic' is most usually applied to the kind of mark-making associated with the printing and reproduction of text and image: "*of, relating to, or involving such reproductive methods as those of engraving, etching, lithography, photography, serigraphy, and woodcut*" (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Therefore, graphic design primarily concerns the reproduction of visual text and images by all the various technologies presently on offer. Richard Hollis' *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (1994) associates the development of graphic design from print technologies to the revolution of computer graphics in the current 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hollis (1994) and Aynsley (2001) have both indicated that the term 'graphic design' was coined by American book and type designer William Addison Dwiggins in 1922 and achieved widespread usage only after World War II. Only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century did the term come into general use to describe the practice as a professional and/or educational activity.

Having look at these historical and theoretical accounts on the definitions of graphic design, we next consider the industry practitioners point of view and the international

graphic design associations definitions, within which nation branding has emerged as a niche in the graphic design profession. Soar (2002a, vi) has described graphic design as “*a ubiquitous, yet largely invisible, practice that nevertheless contributes substantially to the make-up of our visual culture*”. In his study, Soar found that there are increasingly conflicting ideas about how to identify and demarcate the definitional boundaries of ‘graphic design’, as evident from the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA)’s debate in altering its name: ‘communication design’ or even ‘experience design’ as proposed by Grefé and ‘information designer’ or ‘infodesigner’ as favoured by Bonsiepe (in Soar, 2002a, p.22). It is worth noting that there have also been many debates on the terminology of ‘graphic design’ versus ‘communication design’. Soar (2002a, p.23) points out that this kind of “*professional demarcation has an effect on designers’ self-perceptions: how they think of themselves, and what constitutes legitimate design practice*”. According to Saldanha (2003), some have tried to combat this by dropping the descriptor and calling themselves ‘designers’. However, this term is rather vague and it may be associated with other types of design or designers such as interior, fashion or product. Authors such as Frascara (2004) and Nini (1997) have argued that it would have been more useful if graphic designers adopted the term ‘visual communication designer’. However, the term ‘graphic design’ is still by far the most widely used, especially in emerging nations such as Malaysia. According to Caban (2004, p.75), clients began to understand the graphic design profession and its role in Malaysia only in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century; therefore, most designers working in that field present their work as graphic design, regardless of the kind of information that is being conveyed, or the medium being used to convey it.

In recent years (2005 – 007), the International Council of Communication Design (ICOGRADA) undertook a major policy review, which included the attempt to build a

consensus about what kind of profession graphic design is. Since nation branding has been presented as one niche within this profession, it is important to consider the scope of the activities which this thesis concerns, particularly given the close relationship between nation branding and other marketing and promotional activities. ICOGRADA has attempted to create greater international agreement about the nature of graphic design by ratifying the following definitions (ICOGRADA, 2007):

**Graphic Design** is an interdisciplinary, problem-solving activity, which combines visual sensitivity with skill and knowledge in areas of communications, technology and business. Graphic design practitioners specialize in the structuring and organizing of visual information to aid communication and orientation (The Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario).

Regardless of how much consensus these definitions may bring about, new technologies and ways of doing business are continuously modifying the common understandings of graphic design activity. For example, the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) acknowledges new types of activity and job role (online, 2011). Graphic designers play diverse roles within today's design practice, as evident in AIGA (online, 2011) and AGDA (online, 2012). On these sites, one can see reference to new job titles such as 'design strategist', 'brand consultant/strategist' and 'art director', and descriptions within the profession range from marketing and creative services professionals including print and interactive designers, market researchers, copywriters, content strategies, branders, and more. This also shows that branding appears to remain an area of work primarily for print media, which include graphics, communications, research/strategic and environmental design (for print) (AIGA, online, 2011). In this context, the term 'nation branding' coined by Simon Anholt in 1996 appears as an extension of the more traditional idea of branding, which is increasingly undertaken by media and communication consultancies and the public relations industry that have specialized in

this particular niche market. For example, Axelera Group has undertaken nation-branding projects in Vietnam (China Daily, 2007), Cambodia (Kaali et al, 2008) and Croatia (Triffonov et al, 2009) through different media.

While a variety of definitions of the term ‘graphic design’ have been suggested, this thesis will mostly follow the definitions suggested by ICOGRADA (2007) whose definitions seek to reflect the ways in which graphic design practice are being shaped by the new global economy. The course of my study has focused primarily on print-based visual communication that supports part of a bigger visual identity project related to advertising/ media agencies, brand consultancies, public diplomacy or public relations programme in some form or another; since these print products still tend to comprise the largest and most complex capital component of any such general project.

## 2.2 Globalization and Design

Lupton and Miller (1996) suggest that design is dispersed across a network of technologies, institutions, and services that define the discipline and its limits. Design can be perceived as both an intensely commercial practice and a significant mode of cultural production. The former is more commonly focused upon due to corporate and economic needs pre-empting the social, cultural or environmental factors. The realities of designing in a capitalist world are therefore a matter of concern. The main factors that influence design are political, social and economic. The economic factor reveals that designers are often dictated to by business or financial needs and their practice facilitates the client's demands in design projects. It appears that graphic design practice is influenced and shaped by the way in which modern business is structured.

The forces of globalization – in particular, economic, political, cultural and technological forces from dominant national economies – impact upon the heterogeneity that exists in our environment. As evidence of those forces we are constantly being influenced by new ideas or trends from popular culture, or systems that are set through corporatization, G-7, the World Bank and the International Standards Organisation (ISO), which create universal systems and ways of moving forward. These systems can cause the loss of some intrinsic details of a certain culture or the charm of something that is local. With corporatization and mergers, companies tend to move towards a more global (widely accepted or understood) style, copying and altering in a way that suits the establishment or which is determined by the global head office. These companies and organizations are growing and often merging into an umbrella-like structure where many subsidiary companies with different specializations are managed by one multinational or global head office.

Although globalization is a relatively new term in the social sciences, many have argued that it is not a novel phenomenon. As stated in United Nations (2002, p.2):

Globalization is not a new phenomenon.... Its history dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, ... the globalization process slowed down during the period between the First World War and the last quarter of the twentieth century. The pace of globalization accelerated during the last decade of the twentieth century because of the simultaneous liberalization of trade and economic policies in a growing number of countries in different parts of the world combined with the information and technology revolution.

Sparke (2004, p.211) writes that although globalization occurred prior to the 1990s, most writings about it emerged during that decade and gradually developed throughout the twentieth century. This suggests that the significance of the current global age involves the transformation of the technological base and the subsequent global scope of the mass media. This view is supported by Sklair (in London School of Economics and Political Science, 2000), who suggests that the main driving force of globalization over the past years has been the revolution in communications: the marriage of global communications and computer technology. Globalization creates a worldwide culture and contributes to the creation of lifestyles through several media: Internet, movies, music and fashion. People are more dependent upon technology as a means of communication.

Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann (2006) have made a comprehensive review of the differing views of globalization that have been put forward by various sources from the early 1970s. These views include debates about our world moving towards a single culture, i.e., homogeneity – the homogenization of products, industries, technologies and homogenized patterns of commodified consumption of products. Sparke (2004) has

further identified services, images and experiences subject to this kind of homogenization. Giddens (1990, p.64) describes globalization as *“the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa”*. The interconnectedness of people and commodities through new technologies and mobilities has brought experiences to people in new ways, or found new ways of taking people to them. The globalization of commodities allows people from across the world to share, collaborate and work on similar products more easily, while enabling consumers to obtain better quality products at lower prices. This echoes the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development definition of globalization: *“the phenomenon by which markets and production in different countries are becoming increasingly interdependent due to the dynamics of trade in goods and services and the flows of capital and technology”* (OECD, 1993, p.7). Kanter (1995, p.37) further says: *“the world is becoming a global shopping mall in which ideas and products are available everywhere at the same time”*, and Ritchie (1996, online) says *“globalization as the process of corporations moving their money, factories and products around the planet at ever more rapid rates of speed in search of cheaper labor and raw materials”*. Globalization has influenced the promotion of design, extensive production and distribution in a globalized economy. This can be seen by the various initiatives carried out by national design councils or agencies around the world such as those in Finland, Ireland, Spain, Denmark, United Kingdom and South Korea which have recognized the significance of design in enabling convergence of new market creation, business, technology and arts (ERC, 2002) through the expanding access to better technologies where industries are competing on price and functionality.

The phrase ‘McDonaldization’ of the world is one view of globalization, which suggests a homogenized world, a world dominated by a single culture that erases differences of

local cultures (Ritzer, 2000). Langer (2006) points out that the loss of local, regional, ethnic or national culture is progressing rapidly around the world due to the extensive commercialization thinking and Western cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, many sociologists, including Professor Roland Robertson, cannot help noticing that many of social categories and practices assume a local flavour or character despite the fact that these products were invented elsewhere (Khondker, 2004).

Globalisation, therefore is not the same as homogeneity and even means multiplicity of quite different global villages with their specific values all wired into the new media systems, but all straining to retain or enhance cultural, ethnic, national, religious or political individuality (Langer, 2006).

Mitchell (2000) suggests that despite countless local market differences, most human needs and desires are universal; on the contrary, global convergence does not suggest the total homogenization of everything everywhere. Twemlow (2006, p.15) also states that *“increasingly, designers discover the importance of connecting to a place and a locality, for a sense of identity and as a source of inspiration, as a way to connect with consumers who feel alienated and disconnected by their experience of globalised society”*. The increased recognition of diversity and cultural variety shows that there is clearly an indivisible tie between ‘the global’ and ‘the local’. Sklair (in London School of Economics and Political Science, 2000) suggests that the global system theory has its own version of ‘think globally, act locally’, where it is an expression of how the global capitalist system operates to maximize profits. As we move from local orientation to global orientation, there are also new pressures for local cultural identity and deeper appreciation and importance of cultural diversity. The phenomenon of ‘glocalization’ is apparent. Numerous studies written about the concept of glocalization include Robertson (1992, 1995), Bauman (1998), Wellman (2002) and Roudometof (2005). Robertson (1992) claims that the very formulation of the term ‘glocalize’ derived in Japan in the 1980s from *dochakuka*, roughly meaning ‘global



localization’. He says that the term was developed in particular reference to a marketing issue when Japan became more concerned with and successful in the global economy, after having much experience with the general problem of the relationship between the universal and the particular. The term used in marketing meant that products of Japanese origin should be localized – that is, they should be suited to local taste and interests – yet, the products were also global in application and reach.

For example, the Coca-Cola Company uses the ‘think global, act local’ strategy in its marketing and advertising, tailoring their regional advertisements for specific markets, while the McDonalds corporation has localized its menu by adapting to local tastes (Amey, 2011). We can see many huge corporations moving towards adopting a global standard in the production of design while in their local companies maximizing the recruitment of local talents with content and ideas that shape increasingly localized designs. An example is WPP Group (formerly known as Wire and Plastic Products plc), the world’s largest communications, services group which operates in 3000 offices in 110 countries around the world and which employs 162,000 people from diverse backgrounds, both locally and internationally (Figure 2.1) (WPP, 2012). Advertising and marketing communications services are provided to local, regional and international clients, in which local talents sometimes work on global idea or design concepts but are adapted to the local market. This is further discussed in Chapter Four.



**Figure 2.1.** Wire and Plastic Products plc (WPP)'s advertising and marketing communications services companies.

## 2.3 Nation Branding and National Identity

Nation branding is a specific application of marketing principles to improve a state's global and economic standing. Although a government will usually have its own vision of how to promote the nation, the identity of most nations has usually been established over many years and relies on perceptions, which can be based as much in myth, religion and partial historical views as in fact. Anthony Smith (1991, p.8–15) identifies a number of features of national identity, which he summarizes as follows: "*A nation can therefore be defined as a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members*" (p.14). Batić (2007) suggests that for something so abstract and difficult to define as a nation, one of the most direct ways is through identification with symbols that can represent the nation. Smith (1991, p.16–17) also emphasizes the relevance of symbols for the national community, where he states that:

The nation is also called upon to provide a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions. By the use of symbols – flags, coinage, anthems, uniforms, monuments and ceremonies – members are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging.

Mach (1993) suggests that "*symbols communicate complex ideas in a synthetic, short way, appealing directly to the emotions and semiconscious associations, and avoid intellectual elaboration*". Nation branding may then be seen as an attempt to use the kind of marketing and design strategies found in the promotion of products to manage such perceptions of national identity. According to Sparke (2004), design played a role in the re-branding of many post-1980s nations and localities. Sparke (2004, p.211) also discusses how the opening up of Eastern Europe provided an opportunity for Hungary, Poland, East Germany, the

Czech Republic, Slovakia and a number of other countries to use design both to reinforce and communicate their craft traditions and to develop a modern face to show to the rest of the world. The reformation of these post-Soviet nations also provided opportunities to either recover older national emblems and flags, or to invent new ones, as happened with so many postcolonial nations in the 1960s. Sparke argues that in such ways design plays a role in the creation of identities: people, commodities, places, nations in particular, as well as providing a formation of global identities whose origins are linked to specific localities. With the on-going discussion about global cultural homogeneity as a consequence of globalization, True (2006) believes that countries are increasingly recognizing the need to accentuate and promote the distinctiveness of local characteristics and competitive advantages as they begin to see the value of having a positive national brand image. Dinnie (2007, p.15) defines a nation brand in more neutral terms as being “*the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audience*”. However, even this sort of definition can also be seen to emphasize the brand and product differentiation functions which corporate branding campaigns seek to address in crowded business environments where both companies and products appear increasingly homogenous.

The literature then shows that even though nation branding is a relatively new idea, it offers a variety of different viewpoints and opinions as different nations explore new ways of increasing tourism, foreign investment and national exports. Dinnie has written the most complete review of literature on nation branding to date in his 2007 book, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. He highlights key issues that identified by Aldersey-Williams (1998), O’Shaughnessy and Jackson (2000), Gilmore (2002), Mihailovich (2006) and Anholt (2007) in their considerations of projects targeted towards developing nation brands: These projects involve the application of branding techniques

to nations and places, place brand imagery, and the similarities between corporate brands and country brands. Aldersey-Williams (1998, p. 12) claims that the branding or re-branding of a nation is a highly politicized, controversial activity. O'Shaughnessy and Jackson (2000, p.58) argue that the image of a nation is so 'complex and fluid' as to deny the clarity implicit in a term such as *brand image*, while Anholt (2007, p.4) suggests that politicians need to avoid the explicit use of the word 'branding' as it may appear cynical and arrogant. Although brands are historically associated with products and corporations, Olins (in Dinnie, 2007, p.18) proposes that branding techniques can be applied to every area of mass communications, including those that enable political leaders to play the role of brand managers for their nations. Mihailovich (2006), however, emphasizes the formation of clusters, relationships and alliances with the aim of long-term employment and prosperity. He adds that a simplistic strapline approach to nation branding can be counter-productive. Gilmore (2002) also emphasizes the importance of truthfulness and the amplification of existing values of the national culture when constructing the nation brand. Other publications on nation branding include *Brand America: The Mother of All Brands* (2005) which discusses America as a global brand and provides case studies on brands which have become a financial success and American cultural icons, i.e., Guinness, Adidas and Starbucks, and *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation* (2009) in which Anholt argues that the reputations of nations or places are influenced by cultural phenomena, major events or changes that take place. There are then noticeable differences of opinion between those who see nation branding as just another form of familiar commercial branding, and those who see it as a more delicate and complex branding speciality.

Anholt (2011) says that since he first coined the phrase ‘nation branding’ in 1996, client interest in the concept has grown greatly. Following the attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration spent \$685 million (£365 million) on PR initiatives to promote the United States’ faltering image abroad (Harkin, 2005). As governments seek to bring their countries in line with the new geopolitical scene, Tony Blair set up the Public Diplomacy Strategy Board (Harkin, 2005), developed from his earlier ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign, to promote the United Kingdom abroad (Risen, 2005). Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs hired DDB Corporate Profiles to develop a logo design for tourism and trade in 2001 (Boxer, 2002). In November 2005 the Persian Gulf state of Oman hired Landor Associates to develop a ‘Brand Oman’ campaign (Martin, 2007, p.102).

As Anholt (2011) has observed, nation-branding projects are increasingly being managed by media communications and public relations (PR) companies, which have augmented the more straightforward graphic design strategies with news promotion and ‘spin’ strategies. Some of these PR agencies have developed a unique niche in managing country or nation brands. AMEA Market Intelligence Group and Axelera Group are examples of such companies. Simon Anholt has created the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index and Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index surveys. He also conducts a series of masterclasses on nation branding designed to give government policy-makers, city and regional authorities, foreign direct investment professionals, trade bodies, tourist authorities, export promoters, NGOs, brand marketers and agencies – indeed anyone connected with the health of a national brand – the opportunity to learn the tools to help create outstanding reputations and economic success as observed in international events posted in [www.nationbrandingevents.com](http://www.nationbrandingevents.com). In 2004 Palgrave Macmillan published *Place Branding*, the first online academic journal focusing on this fast-growing field, concentrating on branding strategies and marketing strategies to be applied to the

economic, social, political and cultural development of cities, regions and countries.

*Nation-Branding.info*, an online site by Andreas Markessinis, was also created to track recent developments in the emerging nation-branding industry.

Anholt (2011) claims that between one-third and one-half of all countries recognize the existence of the concept. Research initiatives have been undertaken by consultants employed by numerous countries (often less industrialized or developed countries) in an attempt to generate international admiration of their assets or achievements (Anholt, 2011). Besides Anholt, well-known brand consultant Wally Olins (co-founder of Wolff Olins and chairman of Saffron Brand Consultants) has also taken a keen interest in nation-branding projects. He consults on nation-branding issues and has worked on several branding, re-branding and nation-branding projects (Tan, 2009), including Lithuanian economic image strategy for 2009–2014 employed by Lithuanian Economy Development Agency (LEPA) in 2008 (Lithuanian Development Agency, 2009), and in building images of Poland and Portugal. He has also written '*Branding the Nation: The Historical Context*' (Olins, 2002a), and discussed the success of the image of Spain (Olins, 2001b), and Poland and national identity (Olins, 2001a).

As discussed in University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School (retrieved on May 2010 from <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org>), the concept of nation branding must include brand definition, brand engagement and brand management, similar to the general practice of branding activities. A country must establish an identity, what the country stands for, and what audiences seek in it. The audiences here refer to tourists, potential investors, foreign trade partners, and the people of the nation. To engage with these audiences, a brand identity system must be

developed and then disseminated domestically or internationally. Common forms of visual identity such as taglines, logos and colour schemes are designed and delivered on a variety of platforms and through multiple communication techniques. However, it is important that, internally or domestically, the people of the nation embrace the brand. Sya (2004) suggests that in terms of brand management, the brand architecture has to be carefully planned. The sub-brands must be co-ordinated with the main brand, for example, the relationship between the tourism brand and the country's overall nation brand.

The Cultural Diplomacy Outlook Report 2011 (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2011) provides examples of nation branding in practice, by both developed and emerging nations. Developing regions such as Argentina, India, Moldova, Turkey and Zimbabwe were analysed and evaluated in the report (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2011, p.13). Several nation-branding projects have been assessed as successful: Slovenia and Croatia (both post-Yugoslavia nations) have emerged relatively quickly as tourist destinations following marketing campaigns emphasizing scenic venues and a definitive cultural break from Belgrade, the Yugoslavia capital (Teslik, 2009), while Spain has often been cited as the success story of nation branding. However, it should be noted that almost all these nation-branding campaigns concentrate on what is often termed 'destination marketing', which is specifically aimed at initially stimulating revenue from tourism, with the longer-term aim of making the country a destination for trade and commerce once tourism has made the features of the nation more familiar to outsiders.

The destination branding for Spain in particular has been seen as a successful example. In the 1970s the previously great imperial nation of Spain was associated with being



poor, remote, isolated and backward following the after-effects of the Franco regime. It also had poor tourist infrastructure. Examples of what a nation's re(branding) campaign can accomplish by highlighting what truly exists and reflecting its changed reality, as in the branding of Spain, have been examined by Preston (1999), Gilmore (2002), Olins (2002a and 2001b), Boxer (2002), Risen (2005) and Noya (2005). The branding and repositioning of Spain included numerous initiatives:

1. Combining culture and arts, sports, business and tourism.
2. Using celebrity actors, directors and fashion designers to showcase its new image.
3. Consistently using Joan Miro's sun symbol (Figure 2.2) – bright and vibrant – to represent vitality and a new direction for the country.  
  
The graphic symbol was used to unify various events, advertisements and programmes by both the public and private sectors.
4. Establishing a connection with its Mediterranean beach region to promote tourism.
5. Cultural diplomacy initiatives, e.g., the construction of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the restoration of the city of Bilbao in Basque Country.
6. International promotion: distinguishing the architectural work of Gaudi, the prominence of films directed by Pedro Almodovar, the fame of Spanish actors such as Antonio Banderas and Penelope Cruz.  
  
International events: Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, Barcelona Olympics and Seville Expo (both in 1992).
7. Business: privatization of multinational corporations Telefonica, Repsol and Union Fenosa branching out to Latin America.

8. Tourism: highlighting of Ibiza as a sunny, trendy, party, summer destination (Figure 2.3).



**Figure 2.2.** Spain's Joan Miro's sun symbol.



**Figure 2.3.** Highlighting Ibiza as Europe's biggest party destination with some of the best nightclubs in the world.

It is notable that this choice of cultural and artistic examples all come from the relatively recent history of Spain, and do not include any from Spain's controversial imperial history, which included the ruthless colonization of Latin America, or indeed the period of Christian reconquest of the Spanish peninsula from the Muslim Moors. Nor does it include more controversial features of Spanish culture such as bull-fighting, which for many foreigners is one of the most striking features. Also left out of the campaign were clichés such as flamenco singing and dancing and even distinctive Spanish foods such as *tapas*. The aim then appears to have been to introduce new and less familiar notions of a very well-known major European imperial power that played down the highs and lows of its history in favour of choosing highs that are less controversial for both the local population as well as visitors. Gilmore (2002) and Olins (2001b) suggest that with a revitalized brand image, Spain is perceived as:

1. A modern progressive country with strong democracy and a robust economy, a host for major international events and serving as a hub for tourism, art and culture which are chic and fun.
2. The most democratic nation in Europe (by Latin Americans).
3. The second-most wealthy nation in Europe.
4. Democratic, prosperous and central to Europe – an inverse perception from 30 years earlier.
5. The most representative country in Europe for European brands; thus Spanish brands perform better than others.

Anholt (2008) considers nation branding in Asia to be in its infancy because it is often confused with 'destination branding', which is associated with tourism. Anholt claims that destination branding attempts to promote a place, service or product with the intention of increasing visitors to the country and adding a source of revenue, while

nation branding is much more than that. However, Gnoth (2002) argues that the power of tourism is acknowledged as a determinant of a country's image. Gnoth suggests that the services facilitating the tourism experience at a destination could be employed to develop the country brand across different industries. O'Shaughnessy and Jackson (2000) say that nation branding is a complex exercise and extremely difficult. In comparison to promoting a product through advertising, logo design, campaigns or mass communication in order to attract potential consumers, nation branding has also to do with the overall perception of the nation's image and reputation. It aims to make people believe, be persuaded, and see the country in a different light which can (both directly and indirectly) influence investment, tourism and purchase decisions. Often, it is enhanced by what the country does well, for example, the 'made in ...' or 'country of origin effect' which means that Germany can trade upon a reputation for precision, functionality and simplicity in design, well-crafted vehicles and modernist architecture, while the French are known for classic designs and the city of Paris is lauded for its fashion, and so on. Managing director of FutureBrand Southern Cone, Gustavo Koniszczer (in Carbone, 2010) stated that the 'made in ...' effect functions for export promotions, which are a feature of that country's brand. Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2001) state that besides the country of origin effect, there are several other determinants towards the perception of a nation's image, such as national identity, sport(s) and cultural products. This indicates that products or services offered by a country influence the nation's brand because they produce (positive or negative) associations in relation to the origin of the product to the target markets, audiences or consumers. Several countries, such as South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan, are attempting to follow the success of Japan, which built its economy on manufacturing and the export of goods (Anholt, 2008). According to Sparke (2004, p.211), these countries have used design as a way of re-branding themselves, modernizing their cultures and entering international

trade – one way to move beyond their imperial pasts. This is evidenced by the introduction by former Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia's Look East Policy in 1982.

Country Brand Index (CBI) is a study on country brand strength globally conducted by FutureBrand annually since 2005. The most recent 2011–2012 CBI is based on perceptions of 113 nations, comprising interviews, insights and information obtained through social media tools about what makes a country brand powerful and unique, to investigate key opinion-formers and influencers (FutureBrand, 2011). The report indicates the significant attributes for Malaysia appeared to be in Tourism, ranking third for 'Value for Money' and ninth for 'Food'. In comparison, Malaysia's neighbouring countries such as Singapore, Thailand and India, which have strong country brands, ranked higher. Overall rankings indicate that the city-state of Singapore ranks sixteenth in the world, much higher than Malaysia at forty-third (FutureBrand, 2011). The report shows that Singapore possesses more attributes encompassing excellence in Value System, Quality of Life, Good for Business, Heritage and Culture, and Tourism. However, Singapore's higher ranking could also be seen to demonstrate Gnoth's argument that the destination appeal of a nation is a key factor for the success of its nation brand. Furthermore, given the level of foreign ignorance about any particular country, it is easy to imagine that if London seceded from the United Kingdom, it too might have a higher ranking than the remainder of the United Kingdom, particularly given London's importance as a major regional airline hub (as Singapore has become for Southeast Asia).

The Future Brand study suggests that countries within the Asia Pacific region have

strong attributes relating to Tourism, Heritage and Culture. It is particularly important for developing countries such as Malaysia to “*prevent the image of the place from lagging too far behind its fast-changing reality*” (Anholt, 2006, p.97). Such countries need, instead, to tap into their significant geographic location and the diversity of attractions, venues, culture, historic sites and food they can offer both to travellers and investors, all features which can increase a nation’s brand performance.

## 2.4 Ways of Thinking about design

### 2.4.1. Design thinking

Nussbaum (2011) describes design thinking as a culture of process efficiency, a process that promises to deliver creativity, originally offered to the business world. With today's global economy, design thinking has been employed in the fields of contemporary design, engineering, management and business practices in respect of the potential it has to channel the ideation process in order to innovate at a higher level. According to Walters (2010), the term itself may be relatively recent but design thinking is not new; in 1959 Doblin, a company specializing in applying design methodologies and ideas to different and larger contexts and problems than those traditionally tackled by or offered to designers, was asked by Japan's Ministry of international Trade and Industry to create a national design policy. Design practitioners working on nation-branding projects will be aware of the many models of design research that are offered by both various agencies and academic groups. Over the past decade, design thinking has been implemented by organizations such as Procter & Gamble and General Electric in an attempt to use the potential design thinking can offer for innovation and design-based initiatives. Some international journals like the United Kingdom-based *Design Studies* and the Taiwan-based *International Journal of Design* have been promoting the idea that designing can be characterized as a way of thinking that is not confined to those who practise design professionally. Design thinking has also been understood as a methodology used by experts to utilize design to tackle the 'wicked problems' (Buchanan, 1992).

Executives at leading agencies like IDEO and Interbrand have taken the principles and methodologies, internalized them and marketed themselves by reference to a particular

design process that is unique to their organization, which can guarantee the best results for clients. The design process of IDEO's Shopping Cart is a clear example of the application of the organization's brainstorming process called 'Deep Dive' (IDEO, 1999), which has been branded as IDEO's unique design research method. It is simple, clear and able to be adopted by design practitioners looking for an innovation process, whether it is systems, experiences, or improving the product line in a business. This is evident from DesignLab©'s (in Malaysia) initiative in establishing a design thinking programme that introduces professionals from multi-disciplined industries to work as a collective to create solutions using the design process. The programme, which actively adopts IDEO's process, is aimed at positively addressing local design issues, and leads the development and transformation of design across all types of industry in Malaysia (Razif Nasruddin, 2012). It is observed that the notion of design thinking is beginning to gain interest from design practitioners in Malaysia forming a design dialogue among professionals and small groups of design students on the possibilities collaboration can offer design solutions through the design thinking process. The increased awareness amongst design practitioners of the importance of creative thinking, and exploring various design thinking processes to create workable solutions whilst approaching everyday design solutions is in line with the design research methods employed in many design research projects where research is undertaken through design, as suggested by Frayling (1993).

#### **2.4.2. Ways of investigating the thinking of designers**

Many of the methods proposed by design researchers for investigating the ways in which designers think have been adapted from the social sciences. Authors like Csikszentmihalyi (1997, 1988) have stressed the importance of examining the creative process that designers follow, whereas authors like Norman (1986) have concentrated



more upon the aims of the cognitive processes followed in design, particularly the consideration of the user's needs. In addition to these theory-driven approaches, there are also observational approaches that owe more to mass-observation techniques. Razif Razif Nasruddin (2012) points out that different design disciplines bring different scales of approach in design thinking. As the design process is the core of innovation, different approaches or techniques and tools are used as means of investigating the designer's working process. For instance, industrial designers may emphasize adopting technological tools for human-centred applications, and graphic designers may use semiotics to communicate their ideas. For example, the cultural probes method (Gaver et al., 1999) has been used to inspire ideas in a design process and as a tool for gathering inspirational information about people's lives, values and belief systems. The inspirational responses gathered may indicate one's ideology, recognize a pattern of behaviour, and provide new concepts or theories. The process of ideation can also take place when raw ideas are translated into prototyping or the implementation of a potential design solution / realization of ideas. Therefore, it has potential in the development of understanding the ways in which designers work in particular regions locally, or in-house design agencies, organization guides or style manuals, where the design processes of particular companies can be made more explicit, more embedded, and more easily passed on to other colleagues.

#### **2.4.3. Ways of investigating the local workplace culture**

Although design agencies increasingly work in a globalized environment, their workplaces are most likely to be run according the cultural norms of the locality in which their office is based. An example is the Perú Country Brand project directed by Gustavo Koniszcer, an Argentinean graphic designer / managing director of FutureBrand Southern Cone, an American global consulting and branding strategy agency of

Interpublic Group based in Latin America (Koniszcer, 2012). Therefore, however similar the work produced by different agencies may appear, the environment in which the work has been produced is seldom the same. For example, in Japanese and Korean agencies there is a strict office hierarchy culture that requires junior staff to be deferential to senior staff and not leave the office before their senior colleagues. The study on Korean hierarchy as discussed by Jouhki and Paaso (2011) suggests that in the Asian work hierarchy culture the key themes include the manner of speaking (by junior staff), working long hours, the authority of bosses, employees awaiting instructions, and status defined by generation and gender. The same deference will not be found in a London agency, even though some of the Asian protocols – such as not leaving work before the boss – can also be seen in some United Kingdom (UK) companies, and more so in American ones. As Jouhki and Paaso (2011, p.10) indicated, in the ‘better keep quiet’ culture where it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one’s superiors in the organization, it is therefore difficult to find out exactly how designers think about their work and the kind of processes they employ by means of interview. Designers are likely to give the kind of answers they believe the company would want them to give or, in some cases, use the interview as an excuse to express their grudges with their colleagues or bosses. One of the best ways of getting around these problems is to observe what designers do in an unobtrusive way, or a way that allows them to reveal their own personal ways of doing things without feeling that they are doing them for their employers. Akama (2008) and Hielscher et al. (2007) have identified cultural probes as a useful way of doing this.

Another notable difference is the value that Asian agencies place on technical excellence, compared to European agencies which are more focused on idea generation and are happy to contract out the more difficult technical challenges to specialists, or even

subcontractor technical agencies. This can be seen particularly in the case of print management, where it is customary in the United Kingdom for designers to subcontract all the origination work to specialist agencies; in Hong Kong or other Asian regions, design agencies usually do that kind of work themselves. It has been observed that many design companies in Asia particularly focus on the business sustainability and less on celebrating innovation within the context of design. The emphasis on financial authority and, perhaps, according to Razif Nasruddin (2012), the lack of trust and regimented managerial process are stifling creativity and innovation breakthroughs. This can be further explored by means of participant observation, as indicated by DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland (1998), as a potential method to discover if there are discrepancies between what participants (designers) say and often believe should happen and what actually does happen, or between different aspects in the formal or social system.

## **2.5 Case Study: The National Identity of Malaysia**

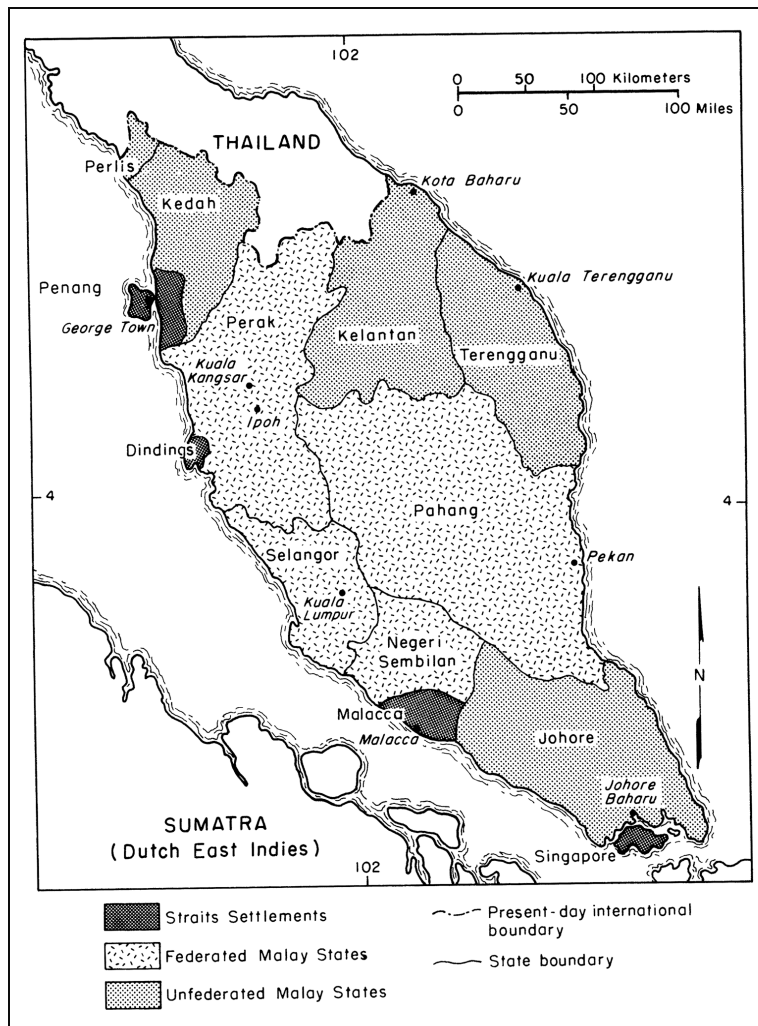
### **2.5.1 The creation of a plural society**

Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century Malaysia's strategic position on the ancient trade route between China and the Middle East has attracted traders and immigrants. So in that respect, Malaysia has always had the features which Anholt (2006) says an Asian country needs in order for its image not to lag behind that of its neighbours. Immigrants from as far away as Egypt, Persia and China have all settled in Malaysia. During the sultanate period of the 1400s Malacca was a major trading and cultural entrepôt. Traders and merchants arrived and Malacca grew to become a centre of commerce, rich in culture and traditions, which were exchanged, creating a cosmopolitan state. Malay became the dominant language of trade in the whole region. Some merchants who came to trade in spices later settled down and married local women. Such was the prestige of the Malacca Sultanate that it became the one of the first targets for Portuguese and Dutch colonists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Migrations of people and later colonial powers of the Portuguese, Dutch and, later, the British brought an influx of people to Malaya. When the Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511 and ruled until 1641, they spread Christianity and built a strong fortress, A'Famosa, to protect the town of Malacca from external attacks. Then the Dutch East India Company began to destroy the Portuguese power in the East and remove their influence in the Malay Archipelago; in 1641, with help from local allies, the Dutch took control, but agreed not to wage war with the Malay kingdoms.

The Dutch were the longest-lasting foreign power in Malacca. They improved and expanded the Portuguese fortress and built walls to protect the harbour and expanded the city. The remains of the Dutch fort, city hall and graves can still be seen today.

Malaysia, as the land that we recognize today, evolved over time through colonialism and

imperialism. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the British began to search for a secure strategic base for trading in the Malacca Strait, and by 1824 the British had taken control of the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore). British residents were appointed to Perak and Selangor in 1874, Negeri Sembilan in 1887 and Pahang in 1888. In 1896 these four states were federated, with Kuala Lumpur as the capital. After Siam had ceded its rights to Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu in 1909, British Advisors were appointed to Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan in 1909 and to Terengganu in 1918. A British General Adviser was appointed to Johor in 1909. Between 1874 and 1946, British Malaya was described as a set of states on the Malay Peninsula and Singapore that were under British control. British Malaya comprised the States Settlements, Federated Malay States, and the Unfederated Malay States (Figure 2.4) after 1918. During World War II, the Japanese occupied the Malay Peninsula and Singapore territories from 1942 to 1945. The British returned to Malaya in September 1945.



**Figure 2.4.** Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) under British colonialism, based on Bunge's (1984) map (in Hirschman, 1987, p.560).

Today the nation state is made up of a very cosmopolitan society which was already part of a wide network in historical times. Engagement with international trade and diversity has always been rooted in Malaysia's history. Historically, migration within Southeast Asia was a not uncommon phenomenon, but the massive influx of workers, particularly from China and India from 1911 to 1931 took place within a short period of time, introduced a substantial non-Islamic and non-Malay presence in the region, and was facilitated by the colonial power, Britain (Hng, 2008, p. 43). Under British rule, Malaya produced large amounts of tin and rubber, and Chinese were brought in for the mining (firstly gold, and later, tin) industry and from India to work plantations and public works.

According to Hng (2008), the British viewed the Chinese migrant presence as an asset because of the economic wealth they generated by working in the tin mines and through trading activities. These Chinese traders and merchants had already settled in Malaya since the early times of trading in the 15<sup>th</sup> century; some also became shopkeepers and artisans. Although a substantial number of Indians came to Malaya, the number of Chinese was greater; this is evident in Table 2.1, Population Trend Analysis by Race: Malaya and Singapore 1835–1847, (Hng, 2008, p.47). The chart also shows that by 1921 the Malays were no longer the majority group. Together, the Chinese and Indians outnumbered the Malays, which caused Malay leaders begin to have concerns about their future in ‘their own’ land (Hooker, 2003).

Year	Malays		Chinese		Indians		Others		Total (‘000)
	(‘000)	%	(‘000)	%	(‘000)	%	(‘000)	%	
1835–40	323	85.9	29	7.7	16	4.2	8	2.2	376
1884–91	896	63.9	412	29.4	74	5.3	19	1.4	1,401
1921	1,623	48.9	1,172	35.2	472	14.2	60	1.8	3,327
1931	1,930	44.4	1,704	39.2	622	14.3	91	2.1	4,347
1947	2,544	43.5	2,615	44.7	600	10.2	91	1.6	5,850

**Table 2.1.** Population trend analysis by race: Malaya and Singapore 1835–1847, as reported in Hng (2008, p.47), based on census reports and monthly statistical bulletins.

These different ethnic groups were subjected to the ‘divide and rule’ policy, which kept the country divided and administered at two levels, Malays and the non-Malays; the British policy was to ensure peace, progressiveness and was important for continued British domination of the economy (Hng, 2008). Shamsul (1998) argues that ethnicity was, to a considerable degree, introduced with British colonialism. This view is supported by Hirschman (1986, 1987) who claims that British colonial rule had a profound effect

on the emergence of ethnic awareness in Malaysia. As Fenton (2010b, p.38) points out, the British were responsible for the immigration of Chinese and Indians, many of whom were segregated or remained discrete from the Malays, and the ideas of racial difference also took on a public and official form when racial or ethnic categories were used to classify the population, such as in the census classifications. The ethnic classification in censuses, as shown in Table 2.2 (19<sup>th</sup> century) and Table 2.3 (20<sup>th</sup> century), indicate the changes by the headings and order of categories. This is also indicated in Hirschman's study on the meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia, which concludes:

... changes in racial ideology had clear effects on ethnic classifications in censuses. Given the limitations of other forms of historical records (ideas that seem self-evident are rarely the subject of bureaucratic record keeping), the census classifications provide important evidence on the development of European racism in colonial Malaya. Although many of the outward forms of racist thinking have been eliminated from census classification in the post-Independence era, the residue of racial ideology continues to haunt contemporary Malaysia (1987, p.570).



1871	1881	1891
Straits Settlements	Straits Settlements	Straits Settlements
Europeans and Americans (18 subcategories)	Europeans and Americans (19 subcategories, also divided by Resident, Floating, and Prisoners)	I. Europeans and Americans (19 subcategories)
Armenians	British Military	II. Eurasians
Jews	Armenians	III. Chinese
Eurasians	Jews	Cantonese
Abyssinians	Eurasians	Hokkiens
Achinese	Chinese	Hylams
Africans	Hokkiens	Khehs
Andamanese	Hylams	Straits-born
Arabs	Kehs	Teo-Chews
Bengalees & other Natives of India not particularized	Macaos	IV. Malays & other Natives of the Archipelago
Boyonese	Straits-Born	Aborigines
Bugis	Teochews	Achinese
Burmese	Tribe not stated	Boyonese
Chinese	Aborigines of the Peninsula	Bugis
Cochin-Chinese	Achinese	Dyaks
Dyaks	Africans	Javanese
Hindoos	Anamese	Jawi Pekans
Japanese	Arabs	Malays
Javanese	Bengalis & other Natives of India not particularized	Manilamen
Jaweepekans	Boyonese	V. Tamils & other Natives of India
Klings	Bugis	Bengalis
Malays	Burmese	Burmese
Manilamen	Dyaks	Parsees
Mantras	Japanese	Tamils
Parsees	Javanese	VI. Other Nationalities
Persians	Jawi Pekan	Africans
Siamese	Malays	Anamese
Singhalese	Manilamen	Arabs
	Parsees	Armenians
	Persians	Egyptians
	Siamese	Japanese
	Singhalese	Jews
	Tamils	Persians
		Siamese
		Sinhalese

**Table 2.2.** Ethnic classifications in the censuses of the Straits Settlements for 1871, 1881 and 1891 as analysed by Hirschman (1987, p.571).

1957	1970	1980
Malaysians	Malay	Malay
Malays	Malay	Malay
Indonesian	Indonesian	Indonesian
All Aborigines	Negrito	Negrito
Negrito	Jakun	Jakun
Semai	Semai	Semai
Semelai	Semelai	Semelai
Temiar	Temiar	Temiar
Jakun	Other Orang Asli	Other Indigenous
Other Aborigines	Other Malay	Other Malay race
Chinese	Community	Chinese
Hokkien	Chinese	Hokkien
Tiechiu	Hokkien	Cantonese
Khek (Hakka)	Cantonese	Khek (Hakka)
Cantonese	Khek (Hakka)	Teochew
Hainanese	Teochew	Hainanese
Hokchia	Hainanese	Kwongsai
Hokchiu	Kwongsai	Hokchiu
Kwongsai	Hokchiu	Hokchia
Henghwa	Henghua	Henghwa
Other Chinese	Hokchia	Other Chinese
Indians	Other Chinese	Indian
Indian Tamil	Indian	Indian Tamil
Telegu	Indian Tamil	Malayali
Malayali	Telegu	Telegu
Other Indian	Malayali	Sikh
Others	Punjabi	Other Punjabi
Eurasian	Other Indian	Other Indian
Ceylon Tamil	Pakistani	Pakistani
Other Ceylonese	Ceylon Tamil	Bangladeshi
Pakistani	Other Ceylonese	Sri Lankan Tamil
Thai (Siamese)	Other	Other Sri Lankan
Other Asian	Thai	Other
British	Other Asian	Thai
Other European	European	Vietnamese
Others (not European or Asian)	Eurasian	Other Asian
	Other	Eurasian
		European
		Others

**Table 2.3.** Ethnic classifications in the censuses of Malaya and Malaysia for 1957, 1970 and 1980 as analysed by Hirschman (1987, p.578).

Although the evidence shows that the Chinese, for example, were living and trading among the Malays since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were at the same time separated from the Malays because of the differences in language, culture and religion. According to Hng (2008), the Chinese belief that education was the essential link to their cultural heritage and the means for a better life initiated the setting up of schools and mother tongue education in the early 1800s. According to Tan (in Hng, 2008, p.50), the educational

materials such as textbooks were imported from China, as well as most of the teachers, thus influencing the political orientation and cultural values towards their motherland, China. By 1938 there were 996 Chinese schools compared to 788 Malay, 271 English and 607 Tamil schools. Also by this time, the outstanding feature of British colonial rule is apparent – “*structural cleavage based on ethnic alignments*” (Hng, 2008, p.52). Each ethnic group had its own language, religion and culture. The British made no attempt to unite the people, but kept them separate and disunited for economic purposes, and there was a clear division of labour: Malays in the paddy fields, Chinese in the mines and shops, and Indians on the plantations. The Malays were largely engaged in traditional sectors located in rural areas, while the Chinese were in the urban sector, in towns. As Hng (2008) points out, a clear identification of race with economic function had already taken form. However, during the 1930s the Great Depression also affected Malaya, and mass unemployment resulted in labour unrest throughout the decade (Hooker, 2003).

In 1941 the Japanese arrived in the Malay Peninsula and occupied the Malay territories during World War II. During their relatively short period of occupation, the Japanese introduced nothing of lasting consequence for Malaya. The British returned to Malaya in September 1945, and then proposed the Malayan Union to the sultans (local Malay rulers) to unify the Malay Peninsula under a single government to simplify administration of the states. The proposal included: all laws would require the agreement of the British Governor, not of the Malay rulers, and those born in the Strait Settlements, and residents aged 18 years and above who had lived there for more than 10 years, would be granted citizenship (Hng, 2008, p.60-61). According to Hng, this would mean that 83% of the Chinese and 75% of the Indians were eligible, matching the number of Malays who were citizens; hence, this would affect their dignity and identity, and the abandonment of the

recognition of Malaya as a 'Malay country'. Without much control over the economy, the Malays would be in a worse position than before; therefore, they were dissatisfied.

Historians have also described the Malayan Union (1946) as the start of nationalism: "*the Malays rose in one movement to fight to fight against the formation, putting aside parochial sentiments relating to individual states, district or clans*" (Hooker, 2003, p.9). This led to the fight for self-rule and governance, the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the end of the Malayan Union, which was replaced by the Federation of Malaya in 1948, and thereafter resulted in the declaration of Independence on 31 August 1957.

### **2.5.2 The building of a Malaysian national identity**

According to Hng (2008), five leaders have significantly contributed to the building of Malaysian national identity. The first leader was Dato' Sir Onn bin Ja'afar (Chief Minister of Johor, Malaya) who, between 1946 and 1951, established the principle that the essential character of the new nation must be Malay in recognition of the history of the land and the presence of its 'original' people on it. This enabled Malays to recover their identity and eventually assert their dominance over the political and cultural landscape of the country. The second leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj ibni Almarhum Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah (first prime minister) then persuaded the nation to accept a plural society. From 1951 to 1970 he assured the Malays that their identity would not be weakened by the acceptance of a multiracial society.

However, the worst clash happened on 13 May 1969 when the opposition party, which mainly comprised an ethnic Chinese minority, captured the state of Penang and the

capital city of Kuala Lumpur. The third leader, Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein Al-Haj (second prime minister, 1970–1976) proposed the need for economic equity following the racial tensions from within the communities, as Malaysians are constantly reminded of the ‘Black May 13’ in which 800–1000 people are believed to have been killed (Vengadesan, 2008). Historians have always blamed the difficulties in racial integration on the ‘divide and rule’ policy, introduced during the British administration, which generated racial prejudice among people of different races in Malaysia (Farish Noor, 2011). Tun Abdul Razak used affirmative action, introducing the New Economic Policy (NEP) that favoured the Malays in order to eradicate the wide economic disparity between the various ethnic groups (mainly between the Chinese and the Bumiputeras). Bumiputera, which literally means ‘son of the soil’, is an official definition used in Malaysia, embracing ethnic Malay Muslims and the indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak, allowing special privileges as stated in the constitution. The non-Bumiputeras mainly consist of the Chinese and Indians. The fourth leader, Tun Hussein bin Dato’ Onn (third prime minister, 1976–1981, and son of Onn bin Ja’afar), focused on building and protecting the moral basis of civil society. He valued democratic principles and high ethical standards in public life. The fifth leader, Tun Mahathir Mohamad (fourth and longest serving prime minister, 1981–2003) sought to project an international identity. He believed that a nation cannot be defined only at home, but must be positioned externally and abroad. He therefore brought the process of identity building to an international level, further than his predecessors. His vision for Malaysia was to reflect its Islamic heritage, solidarity with the Third World and its commitment to achieving modernity and economic resilience.

### **2.5.3 The people and national identity**

Since gaining independence in 1957, these ethnic groups have lived together as part of the nation. The term ‘Malaysian’ has been adopted as a culture name, although it may not only reflect the Malay ethnic group in the society. Non-Malaysians are often mistaken in their understanding of the term Malaysian, perceiving that all Malaysians are Malay. The main races of Malaysia are known as and made up of mainly the Malays (63.1%), Chinese (24.6%) and Indians (7.3%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Sabah and Sarawak have many indigenous ethnic groups; in Sabah these include the Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Bajau and Rungus, and in Sarawak the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kayan and Kenyah. Historians, including Milner (2008), have traced the Malay origin in Borneo, then their migration to other Southeast Asian countries such as Sumatra and Malay Peninsula. In earlier times, Malays were Hindus and Buddhists, but later converted to Islam. The category ‘Malay’ contains people of various ancestries such as Arab, Bugis, Javanese and Minangkabau. Influences from the neighbouring islands of Java and Sumatra as well as the Indian sub-continent, China and the Middle East have impacted upon the culture and traditions of today’s Malays, and they are a far more diverse group than the Malaysian government might acknowledge. Therefore, the idea of Malaysian national identity is in itself a construct similar to the construct of ‘Czechoslovak’, which was used to unite the diverse populations of the various Austro-Hungarian provinces that were formed into the new nation Czechoslovakia after World War I (Filipová, 2009). The break-up of Czechoslovakia into two separate states after the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1990 further demonstrates how fragile these constructed national identities can be. An indication of the diversity of the various subgroups of Malays is also evident in the destination branding for the Borneo states of Malaysia, as well as the visas that

residents of Peninsular Malaysia are required to obtain in order to stay for any length of time in the Borneo states.

The Chinese first came to Malacca in the Malay Peninsula in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The entourage of Princess Hang Li Po of the Ming Dynasty established the modern-day Baba-Nyonya community, who are from mixed ancestries in Malacca, Penang and Singapore. Later, migrants from southern China who came to work in the tin mines of Perak and Selangor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century heavily impacted the social and religious changes within the nation. They first worked as labourers, but soon ventured into trade and industry, thriving in the Straits Settlements and heading the business industry of the time. Today, the Chinese in Malaysia form only the second largest ethnic group of the total population but they control the largest percentage of the economy. The smallest of the three main ethnic groups is the Indians who were brought in under British rule to work in sugar cane and coffee plantations and later in the rubber and oil palm estates, while some worked as construction workers on buildings, roads and bridges. The majority are Tamil in origin; they brought with them the Hindu culture, language and tradition. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindu traditions still remain strong within the Indian community in Malaysia. Other Indian groups include Malayalees and Sikhs. Table 2.4 shows the recent demographics of Malaysia by ethnic group as indicated by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010):

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Malay (Bumiputera) -predominant ethnic group in Peninsula Malaysia -	63.1
Chinese	24.6
Indian	7.3
non-Malay (Bumiputera)	4.3
Others	0.7

**Table 2.4.** The demographics of Malaysia by ethnic group, Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010).

Malaysia is a multi-religious country in which Islam is the official religion; different religious affiliations constitute the most critical difference in Malaysian group identity. Malaysian Malays are profoundly committed to their religion, Islam, which is according to Armstrong (1991) is unfamiliar to most Westerners. Other major religions include Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, while smaller numbers of people practice Sikhism, Daoism, Confucianism, shamanism and animism. However, the issue of whether Malaysia is a secular state or an Islamic country has been a great issue of debate, especially in recent years and especially before general elections. There have been controversial court cases such as the Lina Joy case<sup>1</sup> (Koshy, 2007) and the tussle over dead bodies of people whom the religious authorities claim converted to Islam between the government and family members of the deceased which have caused much concern among non-Muslims about the creeping Islamization.

The languages of Malaysia are rich and varied. Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) is the national language. Other languages spoken in the country include Chinese dialects such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan and Foochow, which originated from different provinces in China, and Tamil, Malayalee and Punjabi among the Indians. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Lina Joy born Azlina Jailani in 1964, is a Muslim who converted to Christianity in 1998. In 1999 her name Lina Joy was legally recognized by the Malaysian courts, but her change of religion on her national identity card was denied. Her religion remained stated as Islam. The National Registration Department representative argued that renunciation of Islam was a matter of constitutional right and was unwilling to delete the word 'Islam'.



in common with their fellow Malays, Malaysian Chinese and Indian are not homogenous populations, but ones originating from different regions, with different languages and religions that differentiate, and even isolate, them from other Chinese and Indian peoples.

Multilingualism is acknowledged; media broadcasting includes four main languages: English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. Advertising and graphic materials to promote a product are often produced in different versions, using different languages, depending on the target consumers. It is common among Malaysians to know multiple languages, and they are adept at learning languages given the country's diverse linguistic nature. While English is widely spoken it was once rejected in the Malay schools as a legacy of colonialism (Giacchino-Baker, 2000) but has since been taught (as a second or third language) in all government schools. As a consumer society with rapid industrialization, English is vital and is used as the language of business, tertiary education (in private colleges) and for social events. The many other ethnic/tribal groups also speak various languages and dialects.

The social distinction within the national culture is between Malay and non-Malay. Since independence the Malays have dominated the country's politics, while the Chinese have mainly engaged in business and trade – leading Malaysia towards a consumer society. The Malay and non-Malay groups often compete, but they also live together in parallel, frequently influencing and shaping each other's cultures. Barth (1969) and Leach (1964) in Korff (2001) pointed out that the members of an ethnic group share a common interest in their competition for scarce resources with other groups, as well as certain

aspects of a common cultural identity as a result. Social differentiations nevertheless remain linked to ethnic differentiation due to the prevailing association of ethnicity with particular parts of society, such as the cities with the Chinese and the rural *kampung* (village) with the Malays. Tregonning (in Hng, 2008, p. 45) states that the rapid growth of the Chinese in modern times is directly linked with the expansion and economic enterprise from the British colonial times. Korff (2001) also argues that the people living in the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements were strongly integrated into the colonial system for a longer period than the northeastern or unfederated states, and benefited from stronger economic ties. Up until today, the wealthier peninsular society has played the most influential part in shaping the national culture as also evidenced by the location of the federal capital in Kuala Lumpur.

A unified Malaysian culture and identity has long been a point of debate at all levels of society. Many question whether the national culture should be essentially Malay, a hybrid, or made up of separate ethnic entities. The question remains as to what does it mean to be a Malaysian and who represents this 'unity' of culture within an otherwise multiracial, multicultural, multifaceted population? Despite the government's emphasis on the Malay identity of Malaysia, most people inside and outside the country recognize that one of its defining features is its multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, features which are protected by the national constitution, as is pointed out by Raihanah Mydin and Shahizah Hamdan (2003). A Malaysian's sense of Malaysian-ness is the accumulation of his or her understanding of their ethnicity (Malay-ness, Chinese-ness, Indian-ness or X-ness) in relation to those who do not share one's understanding of that ethnicity (Other). As suggested by Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), cultural identity in colonized societies is often associated with the dilemmas of developing a national identity after colonial rule,

often reclaiming it from, and maintaining strong connections with, the colonizer. However, Giacchino-Baker (2000) identifies a contrary pull in multicultural nations such as Malaysia: “*Cultural pluralism is seen as a foreign concept that threatens unity and invites conflicts*”. It is this contrary pull evident in the ethnic policies of post-independence governments which runs against the diversity that appears self-evident to a large part of the population, irrespective of their ethnicity.

In the negotiations for independence, it was highlighted that Malayan-born Chinese are granted citizenship in exchange for agreeing to privileges for the Malays and natives of the states of Sabah and Sarawak (Palmer, 2006). Over time, the non-Bumiputeras have argued that these special rights should diminish. However, the Malay population is adamant about their cultural and citizenship rights, and those of the immigrant groups because the constitution (Sect 153(1)) grants Malays (and natives of Sabah and Sarawak) a ‘special position’. Racial tension therefore exists between the Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras. Giacchino-Baker (2000) stated that the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia could be regarded as, in effect, ‘second-class’ citizens unless they choose to become Muslims. Issues regarding land, language, the Malay Rulers and Islam are the centre of the debates. Through continuing deliberations, generations of post-independence Malaysians remain unsettled on the issue of Malaysian national identity. The Malay Muslims’ sense of identity usually surrounds Islam. When religion is commonly used alongside the other facets of identity such as culture and politics, every action one takes carries a religious nuance. As religious elements are used to form the basis of one’s sense of responsibility these elements then become the foundation of one’s sense of identity.

The Chinese increasingly voice their consciousness of identity. Social and historical pasts influence the many emotions and experiences of the Chinese minority in Malaysia.

Within a nation in growth, the Chinese often explore and question issues of identity and their sense of belonging. They may be ethnically Chinese, but generations have passed, and the Chinese in Malaysia are no longer rooted in China's traditional ways. Indian diaspora in Malaysia is based on the formation of an identity through movement, a divergence from an ancient tradition and its harnessing of new ones. The significance of their contribution to the cloak of identity handed down to the present Malaysian Indian is disregarded by most, deluded by derogatory representation of the Indian immigrant labourers in historical narratives (Raihanah Mydin and Shahizah Hamdan, 2003).

Raihanah Mydin and Shahizah Hamdan have offered the viewpoint that the Indian immigrants who were raised in poverty, their endurance and presence in Malaysia for the past 150 years, who were deemed docile in the plantations and other places of labour.

As a postcolonial nation, the people of Malaysia have struggled to find a sense of belonging to the country they recognize as home due to the experience of colonization and generations of rule under the tensions of imperial powers. Korff (2001) states that sometimes, attempts are made to emphasize their differences from the associations of an imperial past, by self-describing Malaysia as a successful 'globalizer' when portrayed in the mass media. Common terms such as 'postcolonial' and 'Islam' are also used as ways of expressing Malaysian particularities. However, to better understand one's sense of identification, one needs to be aware of the existence of both the imperial power of the postcolonial power and the colonized, which thus creates the postcolonial sense of identification (Raihanah Mydin and Shahizah Hamdan, 2003). As indicated by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005, p.367), "*the basic skill for surviving in a multicultural world is understanding*

*first one's own cultural values (and that is why one needs a cultural identity of one's own) and next the cultural values of the others with whom one has to co-operate"*. Malaysian society suffers from the inability to recognize, integrate and reflect its ethno-cultural diversity (Kumaraswamy, 2006). Although identity is an important aspect of understanding the politics of a country, the notion of national identity also needs to take into consideration other aspects of a technologically driven culture – especially in a globalized world.

National identity is the depiction of a country as a whole, encompassing its culture, traditions, languages and politics. The identity of a nation makes citizens of a nation feel a sense of belonging, part of a group or community that shares a unique identity and nostalgic past that no other nation is part of. There is a sense of pride, empowerment, and acceptance within this identity which contributes to the shaping of the individual (Aldersey-Williams, 1992). National identity, as described by Smith (1991, p.9), involves

... some sort of political community, however tenuous. A political community in turn implies at least some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong.

As previously mentioned in section 2.5.2, Tun Mahathir Mohamad (fourth and longest-serving prime minister of Malaysia) is a dominant political figure whose entire political career reflected his *"obsession with questions of identity, firstly with that of the Malays as a race and later that of Malaysia as a nation"* (Hng, 2008, p.135). He believed that national identity is an expression of nationhood and identified the role of the nation's foreign policy, thus the articulation of a nation's international positioning to reflect its identity. He played a major role in the shaping of international perspective upon Malaysia's national identity,

including strengthening relationships with Third World countries and playing a larger role in the affairs of the Muslim community. He made Islam a central component of Malaysian identity. Also, he worked upon elevating Malaysia to the status of a developed society with rapid modernization and economic growth. His government invested heavily in mega-projects including the Multimedia Super Corridor technology park, Putrajaya (the planned government administrative city) and skyscrapers, e.g., KL Tower and Petronas Twin Towers. Mahathir's 'Vision 2020' (a Malaysian ideal introduced in the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991) statement aspires Malaysia to achieve developed nation status by the year 2020 and to foster a sense of national identity, including the call for *bangsa Malaysia* (a Malaysian race), in an attempt to curb problems of the racial differentiations due to the country's multiracial and multicultural matrix. Hng (2008) points out that *bangsa* can mean 'race' in the ethnic sense, but it can also mean 'nation' or 'people' in the sociological or political sense. However, the word is often used in a way that does not differentiate between these two meanings. He added that: "*the lack of clarity does not assist in the construction of a national identity*" (Hng, 2008, p.152).

In these days of global economy, the question of national identity in Malaysia is still unresolved. As Razif Nasruddin (2010, p.72) observed, "*No one is sure what Malaysian identity is.*" Palmer (2006) suggests that factors which influence Malaysian identity include religion, social class, attitudes toward change and the Malays' fear of the Chinese, and adds: "*Ethnicity is the key to any discussion of identity in Malaysia.*" As previously discussed in section 2.5.2, the ethnic division is mainly between the Bumiputeras (Malays and the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak) and the non-Bumiputeras. In other words, the Malaysian governmental approach to national identity has been sharply focused on just one of the four characteristics (ethnicity) which Smith (1991) gives for national identity. The issue of ethnicity pervades even the shared economy and legal framework, since

Bumiputeras enjoy the availability for mutual funds purchases that are for 'bumiputera-buyers only', which has approximately 3 to 5 times return rates that of local commercial banks, and education privileges denied to ethnic minorities. Another pro-bumiputera policy includes some government-tendered projects that require companies submitting tenders to be bumiputera-owned.

Hng (2008) states that there are problems in overlapping nationalisms. Since World War II a vast majority of the non-Malays have been born locally, in Malaysia. The Chinese and Indians in particular, although sharing a common cultural heritage with the people of India and China, have no form of nationality other than Malaysian. Even though generations have passed, non-Malays are still regarded as immigrants in the apparent and constitutional discrimination against both Chinese and Indians. The routine favouring of the Malays in Malaysia for access to state employment, education, housing and the granting of business licences, for example (Fenton, 2010a), is underpinned by the Constitution, as can still be seen today. There is increased dissatisfactions towards this affirmative action that was set up by the ruling government in the 1970s, when the New Economic Policy (NEP) was intended to eradicate poverty, particularly among the Bumiputeras, as the Chinese became central to the urban economy and were settling in urban areas, while most Malays remained in rural areas (previously mentioned on p.53). In actuality, there is a vast difference between the Malays in the high social level group (mainly the leaders of the ruling government and business elites) and the rural Malays. As Fenton (2010a, p.110) asserts, "*the pro-Malay policies ... has well out-lived its logic - or at least needs a major re-design - and can be seen as a cause of ethnically-marked discontents*". He suggests that any new policy direction will have to include 'cultural respect' for Malays and prospects of material improvements for poor rural Malays. Significantly, "*Malay primacy*

*and preferential treatment is one of the features of Malaysia which undermines any claim to be a successful multicultural society” (Fenton, 2010a, p.110).*

The great complexity of these ethnic, cultural, legal and economic issues then makes Malaysia a particularly valuable case study for nation branding. It can be seen that Malaysians are united in wanting to build a thriving national economy that benefits all citizens. This requires building the image of a nation that is united by a common economic and legal system which is also attractive to the more powerful members of the global community in which Malaysia wishes to play a more prominent role. Yet there are certain features of the Malaysian government’s idea of national identity that divide citizens and threaten to be counter-productive in terms of developing the national economy. Therefore, the challenge facing anyone who seeks to develop a Malaysian national brand is to find the factors that unite the nation rather than divide it. A country like Malaysia desperately needs to preserve the richness of its history and culture to allow ‘outsiders’ to experience it, as well as to reinforce its national identity on a global scale. The ethnic bias favoured by past governments presents a single national image, but not one that really brings out the richness of Malaysia’s history and culture, which could be the key features of any nation-branding exercise that really reveals the country’s uniqueness. Malaysia’s constitutional commitment to multiculturalism provides a better focus for exploring its unique identity, if the nation-branding team is able to properly explore that identity. A Malaysian nation-branding team then needs to develop strategies for making this sort of exploration, and this is one of the key issues to be addressed by this thesis.

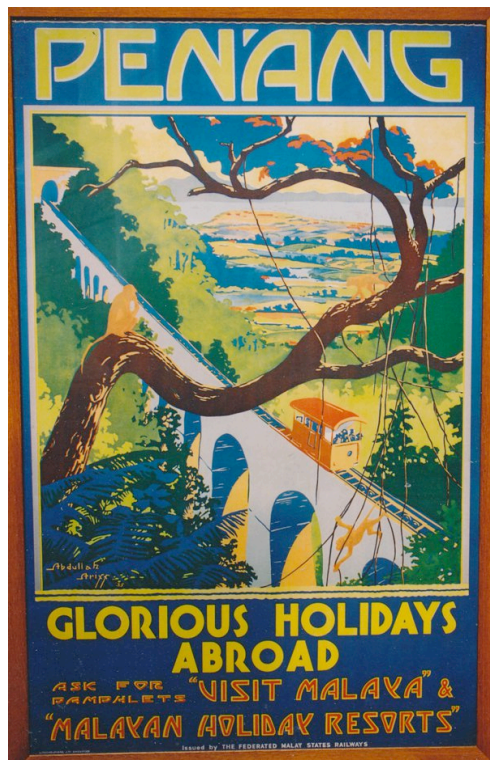


## **2.6 The Graphic Arts in Malaysia**

### **2.6.1 The emergence of modernist art**

A useful way of getting insight into national identity is to examine its characteristics in art and design. In the case of a new nation like Malaysia this is a difficult task, not only because the history is relatively short, but also because prior to colonization there was no design culture equivalent to that of the colonizing nations, only regional traditions of craft production. Therefore, Malaysian design history really begins with the introduction of industrialized manufacturing techniques introduced by European colonizers. The same may be said for Malaysian modern art. The National Art Gallery of Malaysia (1998) defines the birth of Malaysian modern art by reference to the country's modernization process that was led by British colonialists and influenced by Western-derived artistic techniques and approaches. According to Muliyadi Mahamood (in National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 2008, p.195), three main factors contributed to the growth of Malaysian modern art. The first was that British colonial involvement in the administration and governance of Malaysia changed the social-cultural environment of the country. This is evident in the works by artists such as Abdullah Ariff, whose poster (Figure 2.5) depicts British watercolour style featuring a foreground, middle ground and a distant background, an approach not found in traditional Malaysian pictures which, in common with other Asian pictures, tend to represent distance by means of a bottom to top convention, where objects at the top of a picture are understood to be more distant. In fact, Abdullah Ariff's poster reveals the influence of Japanese compositional techniques on European art of that time, where the foreground tree is used as a framing device for the entire composition. This technique was first explored by European artists and poster designers such as Toulouse Lautrec at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al. (2012) suggest that colonial expatriates introduced the current Western modes of art practices through their watercolour works of local landscape, people, and

flora and fauna, which encouraged and influenced the practice of watercolour landscape painting by local artists in the years before World War II.



**Figure 2.5.** 'Penang, Glorious Holidays Abroad', travel poster by Abdullah Ariff, printed in 1935 by Singapore Lithographers Ltd., published by the Federated Malay States Railways.

Secondly, the British brought in migrants from China and India to work in rubber estates and tin mines. Among them, the English- and Chinese-educated migrants formed a small group of locally-born self-taught artists sharing individual interests and motivations rooted in their own cultural backgrounds that were external to Malaysia. Many artists from China who arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the art scene as well as brought in traditional trades and crafts. This is evident in the visual culture particularly in the historic cities of the Malacca Strait. The establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore in 1938 was one of the first indigenous academies that further enriched the local painting styles by converging the Oriental and Western aesthetic elements (National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 2008). Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al. (2012) claimed that some of NAFA's alumni later founded major art schools in Malaysia.

Thirdly, the British educational system, particularly the multiethnic English-medium schools, reinforced the process of Westernization. Christian mission schools were first set up in the 1830s to develop the pool of future administrators. These schools also supplanted some of the earlier indigenous education system that was religion-centred and mystical in its approach, often being a madrasah-type of system offered by local mosques (National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 1998). In the mission schools, subjects such as English literature, history and law further instilled English cultural values. Local art practices incorporated Western artistic influences and values. Artistic techniques and approaches were also influenced by Western art styles.

According to Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al. (2012), in 1956, the creation of Equator Arts Society in Singapore promoted a version of social realism influenced by the fusion of Eastern and Western art. The artistic vision within this group of artists is identified as an *“integration of the cultures and cultural essences of the races”* and *“the expression of a local tropical flavour”* (Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al., 2012, p.21). Historians claimed that social realist work, for example, ‘Digging Drainage at Potong Pasir’ (1957, Figure 2.6) can be contextualized by the perceived need to create a specifically Malayan art with relevant Malayan themes in the early years of self-government (Lim, 2005). It is also interesting to note how this picture continues to use the Asian-inspired European compositional methods seen in Abdullah Ariff’s work of twenty years earlier. Mulyadi Mahamood (in National Art Gallery, 2008, p.194-205) also argues that the new independent state’s concern for new social-political and economic developments further moulded the form and soul of Malaysian modern art. Lim (2005) reported a systematic review of literature on post-war prints of Singapore and Malayan artists in 2005 and, in a recent study, Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al. (2012) examined the art developments in relation to experiences

in Malaysian social and cultural life from after World War II to contemporary times. These studies all present the case that Malaysian modern art evolved through the blending of traditional methods of artistic creation, Western influence and developments of visual expressions from the multi-cultural environment.



**Figure 2.6.** 'Digging Drainage at Potong Pasir' (1957), print by Koeh Sia Yong.

From the 1970s onwards the social realist art style declined following the government's preference to attract overseas investment in more high-technology businesses, as well as agriculture, which did not fit with the concerns of the artist group of Equator Arts Society, who were more interested in the social and political issues evident in the agricultural economy that was dominant during the colonial period. Lim (2005) points out that the secession government in Singapore emphasized the need for artists and craftsmen to make and design goods or products that could be sold to the rest of the world, and a forum on art education in 1977 by the National Art Education Singapore which emphasized the consciousness of art and design also reflected the government's

turn towards the ‘internationalist’ role in art. It has been suggested by numerous writers (in Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al., 2012) that 1970s Malaysia saw local artists in search of a cultural identity and attempts to forge a single national cultural identity. This was the period after the 13 May 1969 riots (see section 2.5.2) in Malaysia, when the 1971 National Cultural Congress (NCC) was set up with the objective of encouraging artists to project a sense of national pride and identity in their work; many Malay artists responded to this call by resorting to Islamic design and Malay culture (Azian Tahir, 2009). Figure 2.7 is an example of a Malay artist’s work influenced by the Malay-Islamic tradition where the preferred forms are calligraphic and abstract, in line with the views of the NCC. However, the search for cultural identity within a multiracial, multicultural context was not limited to Malay-Muslim visions. Other artists also established their artwork within their own ethnic culture or began to experiment with different media, technique and styles, such as in the work of Tajuddin Ismail (Figure 2.8). Tajuddin’s work shows a similar interest in calligraphic form to that of Ahmad Khalid Yusuf (Figure 2.7), but it is much more obviously influenced by avant-garde Western art, and the abstract forms combine to form the impression of a landscape, as found in the work of artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Joan Miró; similarly, Tajuddin’s sources of inspiration were not just spiritual, but also his own travels, experiences and acquaintances (Azian Tahir, 2009). Nur Hanim Khairuddin et al. (2012, p.142) characterize this kind of approach as “*others, if not trying to affirm their own identity, demanded a multicultural approach to art-making*”. Such views then suggest that Malaysian artists in the 1990s and 2000s were faced with identity issues driven by the globalization of cultures in the postmodern times.



**Figure 2.7.** 'Alif Ba Ta' (1971) by Ahmad Khalid Yusuf.



**Figure 2.8.** 'Terrance & Terrain No. 2' (2000) by Tajuddin Ismail.



### 2.6.2 The emergence of graphic design

The earliest forms of graphic design are said to have appeared in Malaysia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Malacca's strategic location as a major trading port made it a meeting point and cultural crossing that led towards an unstoppable exchange of design influences (Kamil Yunus, 2007; Ezrena Marwan, 2010). The convergence of cross-cultural design influences is evident in the ornate Islamic texts from the Arab merchants, the porcelains, luxurious silks, printing press and papers of the Chinese, and Indian ornamental textiles; some of the socio-cultural and economic activities were documented through engravings and illustrations (Kamil Yunus, 2007). Kamil identifies the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the time of the emergence of local design, influenced by traders of many nations who brought materials and techniques to Malacca, evident in their royal scriptures, calligraphy and seals. An example is the *Undang-Undang Pahang* manuscript, illuminated with gold and other colours, containing the rules and laws governing the people of the state of Pahang (Kamil Yunus, 2007, p.124) that was written at that time (Figure 2.9).



**Figure 2.9.** *Undang-Undang Pahang* manuscript, 16<sup>th</sup> century.

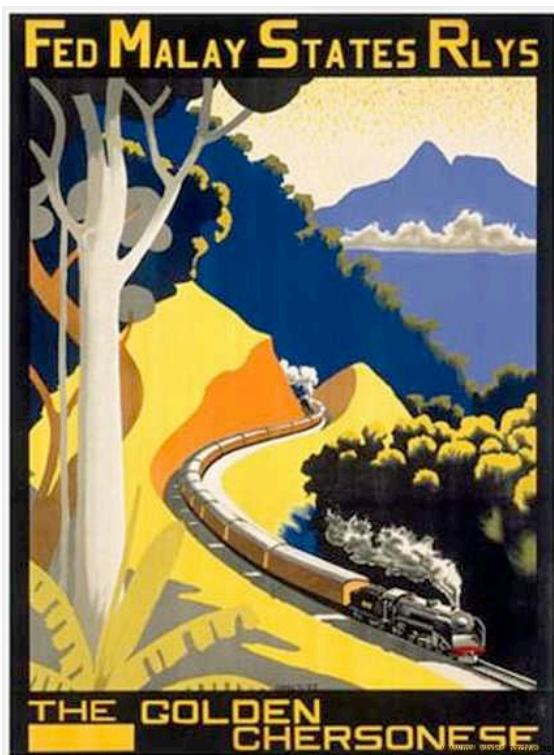
Kamil Yunus (2007) claimed that Malaysia's first sight of modern Western graphic design came from the flags, crests and badges brought in by the colonizing powers, who also introduced political ephemera as propaganda. Figure 2.10 is an example of the kind of Western heraldic corporate identity introduced by the Dutch East India Company; carved in relief, it was added in 1669 on the gateway of the formerly Portuguese A Famosa fort in Malacca. After that, there was an influx of graphic design products due to the need for new stamps and books after the establishment of postal services and education. This view is supported by the graphic design artefacts collection available at *Malaysia Design Archive* [online]. During the British colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British used 'Malaya' as their administrative name. Kamil Yunus (2007, p.124) also points out that colonial advertising emerged during the same time, often employing watercolour paintings. Printed matter – such as advertisements, logos, travel posters, publications, magazines and newspapers from this period – was plentiful. As Ezrena Marwan (2010) reminds us, poster designs featuring paintings in British watercolour style as previously discussed in section 2.6.1, Figure 2.5 (p.61) is an example of work by local artists influenced by the colonizing power. Another example, the 'Golden Chersonese' travel poster (Figure 2.11) from 1930 shows how pervasive this imported watercolour style became in colonial graphic design. Ezrena Marwan (in Birdwatching, 2012) points out that graphic design was used as a commercial tool – which the travel posters were – to create a unified identity and face of British Malaya for economic purposes. The posters may then be seen not only as examples of Asian-inspired European styles, but also as examples of styles that were prominent in similar British posters of the era, such as those shown in Figures 2.12 and 2.13. As can be seen, the compositional technique of the Great Western Railway poster is very similar to the Federated Malay States Railway poster, and similar colour schemes are applied even to English destinations that are less colourful in reality than the Malaysian ones. Ezrena Marwan (2010) also suggests that this



influence of Western modes of practice caused the lack of the nation's 'own' historical style.



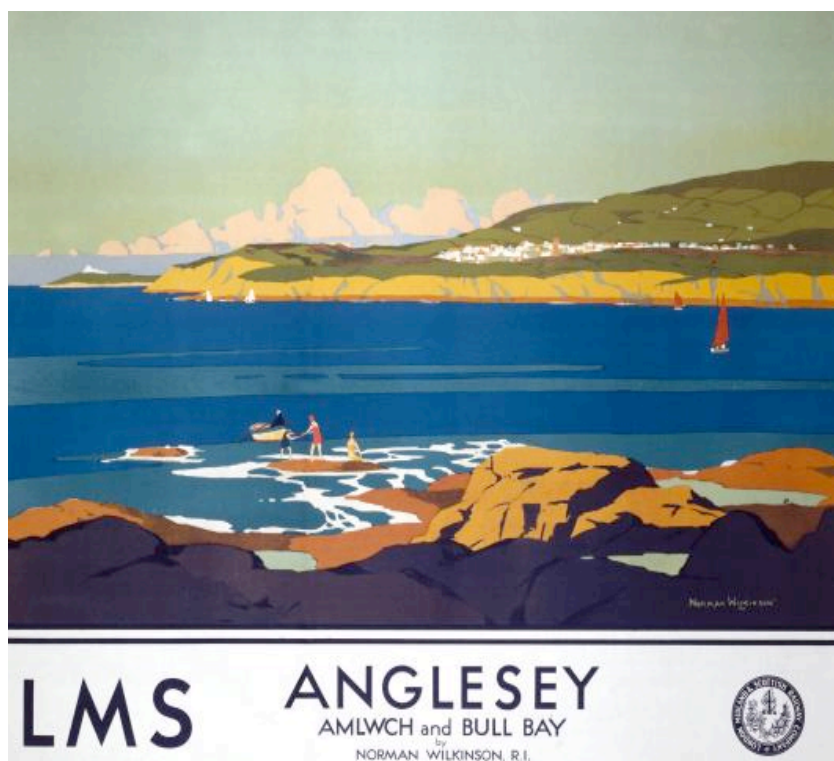
**Figure 2.10.** Dutch coat-of-arms, A'Famosa, Malacca.



**Figure 2.11.** 'The Golden Chersonese' travel poster, dated 1930, published by the Federated Malay States Railways.



**Figure 2.12.** Great Western Railway travel poster: 'South Wales for Bracing Holidays' by Angrave, dated c.1923.



**Figure 2.13.** London Midland & Scottish Railway, Anglesey, Amlwch and Bull Bay, travel poster by Norman Wilkinson, dated c.1929.

In her article ‘Unravelling the Story of Graphic Design in Malaysia’, Ezrena Marwan (2010) has written the most complete synthesis to date of the development of graphic design and has attempted to draw distinctions between the graphic design works through the periods of colonialism, occupation, emergency and independence in the country’s history. Ezrena Marwan (in Birdwatching, 2012) found that design elements such as motifs in company logos, advertisements and shop signs also contain clues about race relations and economic power; an example is the 1902 Simit (now known as Sime Darby) logo (Figure 2.14), which included a set of scales, emphasizing trading activities.

Although Simit was then a small British company trading in tin and rubber, Chinese script was incorporated into the identity. The choice of typography and language use was *“a vocabulary, a visual language bridging and connecting the colonists with the local markets, which was then dominated by the Chinese community”* (Ezrena Marwan, 2010, p.2).



**Figure 2.14.** Simit logo, 1902.

Ezrena Marwan (in Birdwatching, 2012) identified the attempts that were made to remove British icons and symbols from graphic design work during the Japanese Occupation (1941–1945), during which propaganda items such as postcards and stamps featured the distinctive symbol of the Japanese rising sun, and strong bold lines were used to reflect the Japanese woodcut techniques (Figure 2.15). Ezrena Marwan (2010) claims that divergences of styles can be seen reflected in graphic design work during the pre-independence period. Her analysis can be supported by the art developments during the same time, as mentioned in section 2.6.1, regarding Malaysian modern art, which was influenced by the social-political and economic developments in the country. In the West, graphic design was in the corporate age, as Meggs (1998) points out that in the period after the World War II, productive capacity turned towards consumer goods and this led to the new capitalist economic structure which could bring economic expansion and prosperity. Corporate companies became aware of the need to develop a corporate image and identity for the diverse audience; thus, design was seen as a major way to shape a reputation for quality and reliability. In comparison, Ezrena Marwan (2010) claims that in this period graphic design saw a more nationalistic undertaking in Malaya as this was the years prior to independence.





**Figure 2.15.** 15-cent stamp issued in 1943.

An example of Western influence in local graphic design can be seen in political posters such as Hossein Enas's 'Berkhidmatlah kepada Tanahair' (Figure 2.16) in 1951, which was designed to enlist volunteers in the army in Malaya. It is particularly interesting because it has similar qualities to two of the most famous posters in Western history: the 'Britons (Lord Kitchener) Wants YOU' poster by Alfred Leete (Figure 2.17) in 1914 and the 'I want you for the U.S. Army nearest recruiting station' (also known as Uncle Sam) poster by James Montgomery Flagg (Figure 2.18) in 1917, both designed to persuade millions of young men to join the Army. The image of Lord Kitchener first appeared on the front cover of *London Opinion* magazine on 5 September 1914, resulting in the highest number of enlisted volunteers that month. Ezrena Marwan (2010) argues that, despite the Malay man wearing traditional attire in Hossein Enas's poster, the man's visual expression appears to be remarkably menacing, and its composition was undoubtedly influenced by America's 'Uncle Sam' version of the Kitchener poster, which has the same intention. In the final part of her review, Ezrena Marwan (2010) writes: "*while still*

*without a graphic style or particular forms to characterise 'Malaysian design', we begin to unravel the threads of influences ... through different forms of design work'.*



**Figure 2.16.** 'Berkhidmatlah kepada Tanahair', poster by Hossein Enas, 1951.



**Figure 2.17.** Britons (Lord Kitchener) Wants YOU, poster by Alfred Leete, 1914.



**Figure 2.18.** 'I want YOU for U.S. Army nearest recruiting station', poster by James Montgomery Flagg, 1917.

### 2.6.3 The development of art and design education

According to Yeoh and Redza Piyadasa (2007, p.130), the British in the Malay Peninsula during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century did not view Western-type art education as vital to their overall plans of governance and, therefore, no formal art academies were established in the country. However, there were emerging art establishments that focused on the arts and crafts and fine arts and, as Yeoh and Redza Piyadasa (2007) point out, art was included as an examinable subject for the Overseas Cambridge School Certificate examinations in 1924 following the emphasis on a 'Victorian Art and Crafts' approach. In 1950s post-war Britain, and prior to Malaysia's independence, the teaching of art in local art schools adopted new approaches following the appointment of a British Superintendent for Art Education within the Ministry of Education in Kuala Lumpur and a Malaysian art graduate who returned from England, and the establishment of art groups such as Wednesday Art Group, Selangor Art Society and Thursday Art Group

(Yeoh and Redza Piyadasa, 2007, p.131). The National Art Gallery of Malaysia (1998) suggests that the influence of Western modes and cultural tastes accelerated the transformation process of an inherently complex socio-cultural milieu.

Formal graphic design education emerged in the 1960s in both private and national institutions. The Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA) and the Kuala Lumpur College of Art were both privately established by graduates of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) (previously mentioned in p.61), and the School of Design at MARA Institute of Technology (now University Teknologi MARA (UiTM)) was established by the Malaysian government (Yeoh and Redza Piyadasa, 2007). These establishments offered art programmes including painting, sculpture, and graphic art/design, and the curriculum was based on the Western model, which included courses in typography. Kamil Yunus (2007, p.125) argues that although art was needed to enrich the country socially, and play a part in nation building, art and – more specifically – design were not recognized as a resource for economic development. This view is supported by the emphasis placed on agriculture, engineering and sciences to build and develop the post-independence nation, and also indicated by Bernama, which in 2009 wrote that the government's modernizing policy emphasized the fields of science and technology for a developing economy. Hence, it can be concluded there was a lack of appreciation and focus on the arts and the creative economy in the country.

The growth of private design colleges was rapid during the early 1990s, following the demand for skilled artists and trained designers in the field of computers and mass communications. Kamil Yunus (2007) indicates that most of these design institutions



resorted to a more vocational approach to graphic design in order to generate a high turnover of graduates. Unfortunately, the academic aspects were minimized, and this perhaps led to the lack of understanding and the abandonment of Malaysia's graphic design history. The minimal published academic materials and the lack of historical details of the development of graphic design in Malaysia support this view.

Many private colleges offer 'twinning' programmes where the students undertake part of their degree in Malaysia and the other part in an overseas institution. Other partnerships enable students to transfer credit points from course transcripts at the discretion of the partner university. Educational art establishments in Malaysia include the One Academy of Communication Design in Subang Jaya and Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology in Putrajaya. Franchise programmes offer another type of partnership programme in which students are able to attain a foreign degree but they study in Malaysia. KBU International College in Petaling Jaya offers this programme, which has been termed 'offshore education'. There are also institutions offering courses in collaboration with a foreign institute or university (usually Western-type education from Australia, the United Kingdom or the United States).

The key considerations within graphic design education that need to be examined also lie in the education sector; primary and secondary level education in government schools does not place emphasis on the creative arts. On the other hand, tertiary art and design education is conducted in private and government education systems, which vary in terms of syllabus and standards. It is apparent that the teaching environments and pedagogic models of different universities vary greatly; such as the teaching styles of

tutors, the educational profile of the students and the institutional pedagogic approach. Malaysia has only a handful of universities offering degrees in graphic design while the remainder only offer diploma-level courses. Historical and political factors influenced the development of art and design education in Malaysia. One of the most prevalent race-based issues in politics is that education is looked upon from a racial perspective rather than one of competency. A key issue relates to the racial quotas in higher education institutions. A race-based quota is applied on admission to the matriculation programme run by the Ministry of Higher Education. The education policies of the country have been designed to favour politically dominant groups such as the Malays or the Bumiputeras, including affirmative action in public tertiary education (Micheaux, 1997). The majority of the places are reserved for the Bumiputeras. Mainly, non-Bumiputeras need to opt for programmes such as the British 'A'-level programme, Canadian matriculation, or the increasingly popular pre-university option, often having to pay a foreign fee. Students may opt for a foundation course (e.g.: Foundation in Art and Design), which leads them to a degree course, e.g. Graphic Design, Interior Architecture or the like, in private colleges or other similar institutions.

#### **2.6.4 Graphic design practice in Malaysia**

The graphic design companies in Malaysia started to rise in the 1970s. However, it was the advertising industry that dominated the market, enhanced by mergers, links with international agencies, and media conglomerates from the United States, Britain and Japan in the 1980s (Kamil Yunus, 2007). According to Foo (in Caban, 2004, p.75), graphic design in Malaysia began within the advertising agencies and has been treated as the 'poorer cousin of advertising'. This view is supported by Kamil Yunus (2007, p.125) who wrote: "*graphic design was largely perceived as subordinate to advertising*". Kamil states that

only in the late 1980s and early 1990s did giant corporations see the need to diversify and form sister companies specializing in graphic design, while independent design firms started to flourish.

Since the mid-1990s there has been an increasing number of design studios and advertising agencies, in line with the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor (a government-designated programme to improve Malaysia's development in information technology), which evidently created demand for greater numbers of professionals with specialist skills in areas such as IT, design, and entertainment (Kamil Yunus, 2007). This period also saw the establishment of design organizations such as Majlis Rekabentuk Malaysia (MRM) (Malaysia Design Council) in 1993 and, in 1999, Pertubuhan Wakaf Reka Grafik Malaysia (wREGA) (Graphic Designers Association of Malaysia), which became affiliated with the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) in 2001. The advent of modern technology, particularly the computer and electronics, played a major role in graphic design. Different types of design software for print, online publishing, industrial design, film and animation are available to help facilitate the designers' practice.

Since the development of graphic design practice in Malaysia has been little discussed, the author has tried to get further background information from a series of interviews and examinations of design directories in order to better understand more recent developments. The findings of that study are presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Methods and Methodology**

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This chapter outlines the research framework for this study and describes the different methods and techniques applied at each stage of the research: the pilot study, data collection and reflective practice. Unlike a traditional research model, I did not choose a theoretical framework to be applied to my studied phenomena (Allen, 2003). Instead, the notion of emphasizing the value of generating theory as a method of inquiry was adopted in the study, which has resonance with *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Therefore, various methods were adopted to fulfil the objectives of the study. The comparative process in my research utilized a qualitative methodology, combining a design-led approach with sociological methods including participant observation and interviews. A quantitative method was also used in the form of a questionnaire. This reflective approach, which adopts a mixed method, widened the scope of my inquiry and generated information and theories relating to the practice of graphic design in Malaysia.

In this chapter, a chronological account of the methodology undertaken will be described in detail. It is structured in sequence in order to explain how each method is articulated and, through reflective consideration of each method, enhances the knowledge developed by this research and the evolving research journey. The research utilizes both primary and secondary sources: primary data obtained from observation study, questionnaires and interviews with key design practitioners and council members of Malaysia Design Council; secondary data from publications, articles, reports and various other sources. The three phases to this research encompass the pilot study, (primary) data collection and reflective practice.

Initial stages of the research were carried out like a grounded theory exercise (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The pilot study included an exploratory study which examined various design directories to investigate what graphic design practice in Malaysia entails, and the design-led method of 'probes' (Gaver et al., 1999) that utilizes its potential to draw data about graphic practitioners' design process and practice. This approach was chosen since the returned probes have the potential to give insight into the design practitioner's work environment, characteristics of the practice, social engagement, cultural influences in design and general attitudes towards graphic design practice. The pilot study provided more clarification about my research question, aims, objectives, and possible theoretical insights, and has enabled me to more effectively frame the breadth of my research. It has also ensured that I had more time to reflect on my methodologies in the next phase of my research. Observational study was also carried out in the initial stage; I spent time in various design establishments, taking part in the typical working norms of design practitioner's practice, and also engaged in conversations about design practice and the design practitioner's role in the industry. The pilot study generated background information and knowledge on the graphic design practice in Malaysia, which were previously limited to the literature review. The study also indicates that there is a lack of substantial literature on the history of graphic design in Malaysia. There has also been little research done on the design scene in Malaysia. This finding is supported by Nurul Rahman (2008) who claimed that there are no particular websites discussing Malaysian design, such as design processes, design practices, design education; and there is generally little discussion about Malaysian design.

A considerable amount of literature has been published in an effort to understand the design process and practice of graphic designers, and researchers have employed several

methods, as analysed by Waarde (2009), who found that the many studies describing graphic design practice include: Nini (1995), who asked 1500 graphic designers about their activities through surveys and found that designers' level of involvement includes project-related information gathering and analysis, planning, and end-user evaluation; LaMere (2009), who examined the characteristics of graphic design and the nature of the profession in the United States in relation to education and to design awards through discourse analysis and open-ended interviews, and found that her analysis opened up new questions for graphic design research, education, and practice; and Gill (2008), who studied the position of 'new media' designers in Amsterdam, specifically with regard to their working situation through semi-structured interviews which captured the diversity of experiences within new media, and inequalities relating to gender, age and race/ethnicity. These studies show that it is relevant to understand the design process and practice of graphic design, in particular during an era when graphic design increasingly involves a broader and more integrated scope of work. In 1987, Magee published 'The elicitation of knowledge from designers', in which he suggested several useful methods – interviewing, questionnaires, attitude scaling, projective tests, repertory grids and observation of behaviour. Thus questionnaires and interviews were chosen for my primary data collection.

In the final phase, my reflective practice (Schön, 1983) resulted in the development of *A Nation's Visual Language* guidebook and a *Visual Identity Guide* through several projects.

The projects include working with the founder of Malaysia Design Archive (MDA) and the Malaysian Traits photography project which was undertaken with several Malaysian photographers in which the outcome (pictures) was later used in the books. Images used in the handbook and guide are outcomes of the photography project unless stated

otherwise (at the end of the book), in which case historic images are a limited resource and due to time limit and availability, the author used other resources. Using the draft of the handbook, Design Test I was used with third-year graphic design students and Design Test II with design practitioners from Thinklab©. Design Test III involved testing the visual identity guide among third-year graphic design students working on a 1-week design project titled 'Packaging Design Does Matter'. Data were gathered through the intertwined processes of the various methods used. The approaches used to generate information, as mentioned above, reinforce the data by means of triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The outcome and findings are described and discussed in the following chapter.



### **3.1 Pilot study**

#### **3.1.1 Exploratory study**

The process of the exploratory study involved the searching and evaluation of numerous inventory sites and listings, publications and first-hand communication with representatives of a design organization. The idea to investigate what graphic design practice in Malaysia entails arose because there is a lack of substantial literature pertaining to the Malaysian graphic design scene.

To determine the number of graphic design establishments in Malaysia, the methods used included a search of Malaysia Yellow Pages business listings (<http://www.yellowpages.com.my>), Malaysian Institute of Architects directory 2006 (<http://www.pam.org.my/>), and an interview with the honorary secretary of the Graphic Designers Association of Malaysia (wREGA). In this investigation, I also attempted to gather information on the activities being undertaken by graphic designers in Malaysia, and to identify the location of design establishments.

Further study was undertaken to identify design organizations, associations, government bodies and establishments related to design and graphic design, and their relationship. This investigation was carried out through mapping, as it is an easy and immediate method to visualize connections. The map has gone through several versions, with the drafts shown and information discussed with representatives from Thinklab©, a design organization. The visualization of the Malaysian design scene through mapping has allowed me to use the map to facilitate an understanding of the construction and relationships between key design counterparts and establishments in the country.

### 3.1.2 Cultural probes

I used Gaver et al.'s (1999) 'cultural probes' method to elicit inspirational responses from participants (design practitioners). This method was used to gather information as a means of exploring and understanding how the process of graphic design practice may take place over a long period of time. Cultural probes are appropriate for gathering information from users with minimal influence on their actions, or when the process or event that is being explored takes place intermittently or over a long period (Gaffney, 2006). The 'Cultural Probe Kit' contains 'triggers' (Gaver et al., 1999) that could lead designers to engage in a discourse about the design process in a designerly approach.

These tools offer a practical and creative way of learning more about people's everyday work in a context (place) where, due to privacy as well as time constraints, it is not possible to conduct full empirical studies. Initially developed as evocative tasks to elicit inspirational responses and to gain insight into people's needs, dreams, and ways of negotiating their surroundings through a designed-oriented approach, the cultural probes idea has since been deployed by many researchers and designers in different ways and diverse contexts (outside the home). Recognizing the potential of using 'cultural probes', i.e., the designerly act of 'thinking by doing', 'design as research' (Frayling, 1993, Glanville, 1999 and Downtown, 2003), design-led methods including 'game format', 'scenario building', and design a design method (metadesign project) (Hocking, 2008), an adaptation of these methods was employed. Other researchers using this method since it was first published in 1999 (Gaver et al.) include Mattelmaeki and Battarbee (2002), Hemmings et al. (2002), Westerlund et al. (2003), Graham et al. (2005), and Hocking (2008). There has also been criticism from researchers: the subjective nature of probes provides 'fragmentary clues' about the participants' lives, experiences and routines; Gaver

implies that there is a ‘tendency to rationalise’ the method, but researchers have to understand ‘the notion that knowledge has limits’ (Gaver et al., 2004, p.53). Also, the returned probes may be frustrating if they simply cannot be translated or analysed. However, *“deeper and more systematic understanding might be gained through in-depth interviews based on real-time interactions where the interviewer is able to prompt and clarify the context”* (Hielscher et al., 2007).

Taking note of recent developments in the method, I developed my probes asking less ambiguous, more specific questions, as well as having some open-ended questions, leaving room for creative and interpretive engagement. At the same time, the probes were developed to be inspiring and playful to prompt the participants, making them ‘see’ the activities of their everyday lives, as emphasized by Gaver et al. (1999), in the role of ‘cultural probes’ in triggering reflective thoughts and provoking different ways of thinking. This was further articulated by Akama (2008) who points out the similarity of probes to the commonly used ‘method cards’ by design companies such as IDEO that serve as triggers or tools of engagement. While taking note of the ‘appealing and motivating’ design aesthetics, I presented the probes informally (rather than making them look like a marketing pack), encouraging the participants to reveal their own thoughts (Gaver et al., 1999). Although this method was initially developed by designers for non-designers, I could see potential in the way probes can enable the collection of data from graphic design practitioners; thus, this activity was undertaken for the pilot study.

I developed the probes by asking the participants to interact with the selected tasks for 7 working days. Seven different coloured envelopes contained two tasks in each. The

disposable camera with a list of images to record was used throughout the entire project (Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1.** Cultural probe kit.

### 3.1.3 Observations

Several observation-based studies have monitored or observed designers' activities, such as that of Lawson (1972) observing problem solving by architectural students and non-architectural students in a study of strategies used in two-dimensional spatial layout. My empirical study method draws upon the participant observation methodology, which is used widely in cultural anthropology and ethnography. This method usually involves informal interviews, direct observation and collective discussions. Ethnographically, the study is usually undertaken over an extended period of time – months or years. However, participant observation is not necessarily ethnographic in nature. On the contrary, my participant observation could be undertaken within a shorter period in time, which is an

aspect of its difference from ethnography research. For the purpose of limiting costs and time, the duration was set to one week in each company. I adopted this research strategy because I wanted to discover if there were discrepancies between what participants say and often believe should happen and what actually does happen, or between different aspects of the formal system. In contrast, a one-time survey of people's answers to a set of questions might be quite consistent, but is less likely to show conflicts between different aspects of the social system or between conscious representations and behaviour, which is a strength in participant observation (DeWalt, DeWalt and Wayland, 1998).

The objective was to generate background knowledge on graphic design practices in Malaysia, and to investigate its development in the wake of globalization. This investigation was guided by the research question, 'how do the traces of global power play into local meanings and the experience of globalization in graphic design practice?'. I conducted my observation study in four types of design establishment. For purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, the names of the companies (a range of design establishments) are coded W, X, Y and Z: W – local advertising agency, X – local graphic design consultancy, Y – local graphic design consultancy and studio, with international partners and associates, Z – International advertising agency. They also range in size, number of employees, services and activities as well as location (all city centre locations) (Table 3.1).

<b>Code</b>	<b>Company W</b>	<b>Company X</b>	<b>Company Y</b>	<b>Company Z</b>
<b>Company Type</b>	Local advertising agency	Local graphic design consultancy	Local graphic design consultancy and studio, with international partners and associates	International advertising agency
<b>Number of employees</b>	15–18	5–6	5–6	250
<b>Size</b>	Medium	Small	Small	Large
<b>Services and activities</b>	Below-the-line, recruitment and notice advertisements	Brand identity, print and packaging design, environmental design	Advertising campaign, logo and branding, product/corporate identity, fashion campaigns, publishing, editorial service, photography co-ordination, promotional material, packaging design, market strategy, retail and corporate environments/re-branding, environmental graphic design	Above-the-line (press advertisements and TVC), below-the-line
<b>Location</b>	Hip and trendy area, city centre, Klang Valley	City centre, Klang Valley	Business lot, close to Kuala Lumpur (capital of Malaysia) city centre	Close to the heart of Kuala Lumpur (capital of Malaysia)

**Table 3.1.** Observation study in four types of design establishment.

The duration at each design establishment was one week (Table 3.2), in which I conducted interviews and engaged in daily discussion and conversations with a diverse range of design practitioners and professionals from a broad range of roles, background

and experience. They included design consultants, art directors, creative directors, graphic designers, copywriters, account executives and planners. I also kept an electronic log in which I noted down my observations and conversations at the end of each working day.

Code	Date
Company W	1–5 November 2008
Company X	8–12 December 2008
Company Y	17–23 December 2008
Company Z	12–16 December 2008

**Table 3.2.** Design establishments and observation dates.

To identify the process and practice of graphic design in Malaysia it is necessary to understand that graphic design is very closely linked with advertising. Heller (1995) argues that advertising is central to the profession's history and practice, and in his article 'Advertising is the mother of graphic design', he claims "*advertising is rarely integrated into the broader analysis of graphic design*" (p.32). He implies that it is imperative to include advertising when studying the history and practice of graphic design; it is therefore necessary to include advertising companies in the empirical study. Industry professionals who participated in my primary research included practitioners from both graphic design companies and advertising agencies.

## **3.2 Data collection**

### **3.2.1 Questionnaire**

A questionnaire survey method was adopted to gather a range of practitioners' views on Malaysian identity. This method was chosen because it is effective in collecting information and the opinions of a large number of people simultaneously. Also, it 'provides a rapid and relatively inexpensive way of discovering the characteristics and beliefs of a sampled population' (May, 2001, p.89). The opportunity to distribute the questionnaire arose at the Kuasa Power Asia 2009 Design Conference held at Kota Campus Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. It was an ideal sample because the conference delegates included design practitioners (creative directors, art directors, graphic designers, web designers, animators, illustrators, comic artists, studio managers, interactive producers, creative IT managers, design entrepreneurs), design students and educators from Malaysia. The speakers at the conference organized by wREGA (Graphic Designers Association of Malaysia) included design practitioners who pioneered their field in Asia. Purposive sampling method (Oppenheim, 1992; Hall and Hall, 1996; and Sekaran, 1992) was chosen due to the participants' background in design and graphic design practice. Thus, a large population size of the targeted sample was least significant in comparison to the 'purposive selection' (Sekaran, 1992) where the sampling group are those involved in the subject matter and are in a position to provide the information required. This sampling technique was also preferred because the number of graphic designers in the country cannot be determined, as discussed in Section 4.1.1.

Photocopies of the designed questionnaire were distributed to the delegates at the conference. It consisted of 10 questions (5 direct questions and 5 open-ended questions). At the end of the questionnaire, space was provided for participants who were interested



to participate further to leave their contact details. A sample of the questionnaire is included in Appendix 2. Questionnaire responses were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The findings are discussed in Section 4.1.4.

Although recognizing that questionnaire surveys cannot generate a comprehensive evaluation, they are recognized as a useful supportive tool to evaluate general opinions – in this case, of a group of graphic design practitioners. Thus, the questionnaire analysis is supported by interviews in which higher quality data could be obtained, as well as observations.

### **3.2.2 Interviews I and II**

Interviewing was the main technique employed because it provides flexibility. It allows the interviewer to ensure that the interviewee understands the question and its purpose. Selltitz et al. (1962) adds that interviewing can elicit freedom and honesty of expression in regard to what one feels, believes and his/her expectations. Patton (1990) claims that the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind which cannot be directly observed, and categorizes four interview approaches: i) informal conversational interview, ii) interview guide approach, iii) standardized open-ended and iv) closed, fixed-response interview. An informal conversation interview (i) relies on the spontaneous generation of questions following the natural flow of an interaction, while a standardized open-ended interview (iii) requires the questions to be presented in an orderly format using an exact wording. Closed, fixed-response interviews (iv), on the other hand, are rather fixed and rigid in their approach because the interviewer has to determine questions and response categories in advance. In spite of the apparent

proliferation of terms used to describe types of interviews in qualitative research, Bryman (2008) suggests the value of two main types in qualitative interviewing: the unstructured interview and the semi-structured interview. He adds that qualitative interviews are keenly formed upon the interviewee's point of view. Responses such as 'rambling' can therefore give insights into what the interviewee considers relevant and important and give an opportunity to the interviewer to ask new questions along the way, depending on the direction of the interview and any desire to adjust the emphasis. The responses generated by these types of interview have the potential to be rich and detailed.

This research employed the semi-structured interview method. As it was important to allow my interviewees to express their opinions freely while maintaining the conversation within the scope of the topic, a list of questions was prepared as an interview guide, but the interviewee had a great deal of leeway in how to reply (Bryman, 2008). In Interviews I, key design professionals in the design industry were selected as interviewees, including two practitioners from the graphic design field and one from an advertising design agency. All are pioneers in the design community, have first-hand knowledge about the field, and are very respected professionals in the country. They are key design professionals who are influential within the Malaysian design scene, all having an established portfolio and a significant length of time in practice. Also, they are based in the Klang Valley or Kuala Lumpur (the capital city); this is for convenience and because the area is also the most influential for business and commerce. With their particular knowledge and understanding, these interviewees can provide insights and opinions which reflect significant viewpoints about the development of the graphic design practice. The interviews were also designed to explore the notion of Malaysian identity in relation to the discussions of the global and the local.

Interviews II also employed the semi-structured interview method. However, as the interviewees requested a list of questions or topics which I would be asking during the interview, I adopted the interview guide approach (ii) (Patton, 1990) where the interviewees are sent an email on the topics and issues to be covered prior to the interview. To understand the design scene in Malaysia, the dynamics between key design establishments and the ministries working towards a ‘national visual identity’ that contributes to nation building and the nation brand as a whole, the interviews were carried out with council members of the Malaysia Design Council (MRM). The interviews were transcribed, reflected upon and progressively analysed. This qualitative method will be supported with the analysis of the questionnaire, which in part uses numerical (quantitative) analysis.

### **3.3 Reflective practice**

#### **3.3.1 Design projects: visual research and visual identity handbook**

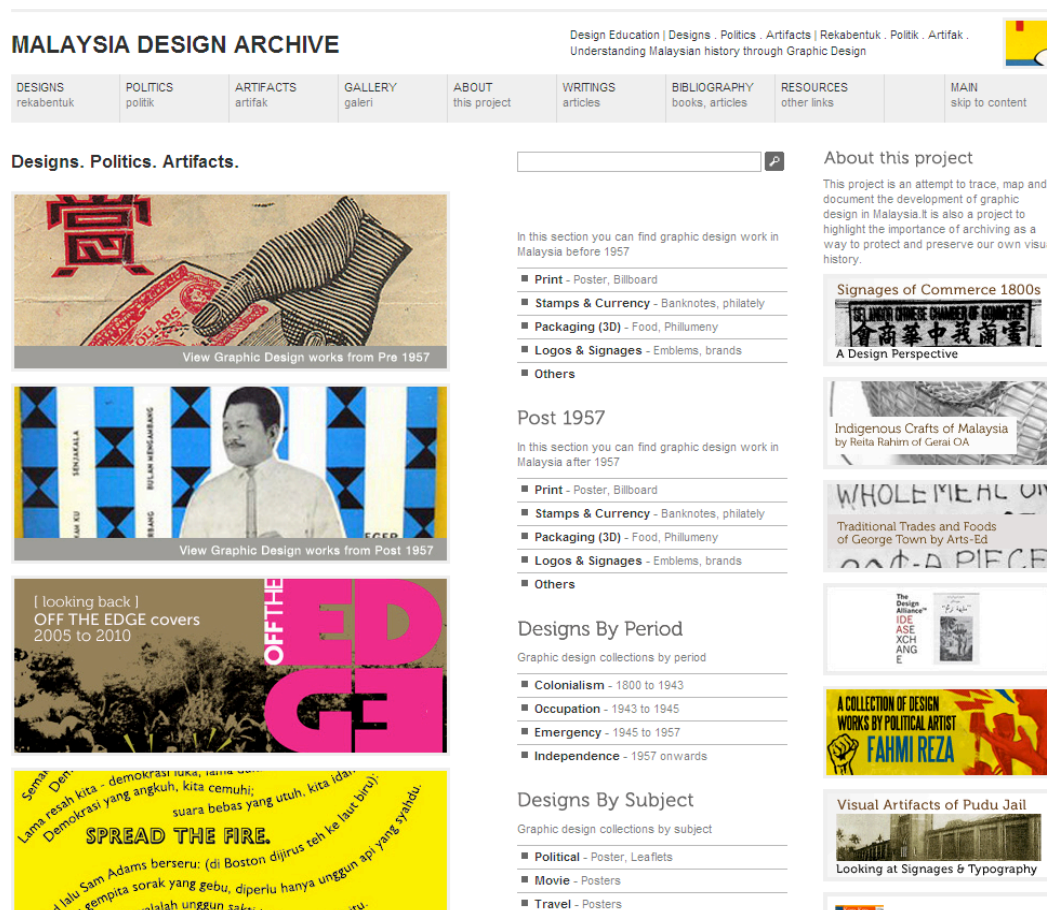
Several design projects involving various design practitioners were undertaken in the process of developing the content for the book in order to reflect a human-centred approach (Akama, 2008). The design projects were used as a method to explore the research questions, to enhance further understanding, and to support the knowledge gained from literature and prior research methods. Writing, designing and gaining feedback/recommendations through tests to shape the concepts and content of the book involve multiple iterations, which enhances the process of discovering knowledge. This reflective process echoes the idea of a ‘reflective practitioner’, according to Schön (1983, p.68)

...the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.

In other words, the reflective practitioner seeks to develop an innovative product in an open-ended way that leads to its continuous refinement as a consequence of learning about the effect of certain actions and formulating new or improved actions. This methodology particularly influenced my decision to learn more about the ways in which designers could approach nation branding projects by creating a manual that designers might use as a Visual Identity handbook, which could be kept in the studio and developed by subsequent designers working on similar projects. The creation of this handbook was then conceived as a project through which to learn more about designing nation brands using the kind of ‘double loop’ learning process that Schön talks about. In this process the practitioner learns more about the subject through responding to the

feedback from their earlier actions in a continuously iterative process, well-illustrated by the activity of musicians and surgeons, who innovate new techniques and performances through continuous attempts to perform certain actions and then systematically reflect upon the results in order to improve the next series of actions.

The projects included a collaborative project with Ezrena Marwan, founder of Malaysia Design Archive (MDA), an online archive ([www.malaysiadesignarchive.org](http://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org)) of graphic design works from 1800 to just after Independence (Merdeka) (Figure 3.2). The collection ranges from stamps of the Japanese Occupation period and signboards from 1910 to newspaper advertisements from 1955. Design artefacts from the post-Independence period range from 1957 to the 1980s. The aim of MDA is to map the development of graphic design in Malaysian history. As a form of reflective practice, this collaborative project is based on systematically mapping, and deconstructing the visual / design artefacts from each major period found in MDA. The visual artefacts were deconstructed through elements of design such as colour and type, while distinguishing the works based on major periods in Malaysia's historical past. The evaluation and analysis of the visual language used are represented graphically in *A Nation's Visual Language* to best illustrate the information that has been gathered.



**Figure 3.2.** Image of Malaysia Design Archive (MDA)'s website, Source: Malaysia Design Archive (www.malaysiadesignarchive.org)

The second project involved working with three Malaysian photographers – Ng Foong Wai, Ryan Cheah and Lim Kim Zhuan – to produce visual content for the book, particularly for the section on ‘Malaysian traits’. The objective was for these local photographers to capture the unique traits and visual culture of Malaysia through the setting and mood of Malaysian peculiarities in everyday life. From these practice-led design processes, a form of knowledge is obtained (Douglas, Scopa and Gray, 2000).

Thirdly, to test the validity of the book, design tests with set design protocols were carried out with design students and working designers. Details of the projects and the methods are discussed in the next section.

### **3.4 Design Tests I, II and III**

Design Tests I and II were carried out between October 2010 and January 2011, firstly among a group of third-year graphic design programme students at a private college in Malaysia and then with the team members of Thinklab©, a Malaysian design organization. The draft of the book design was used as test material to gauge its potential and usefulness and to collect feedback/critique on ways it could be further developed.

Design Test I involved designing a project brief for students of tertiary education level graphic design background. In the process of designing this brief, the course co-ordinator of the third-year graphic design course at KBU International College in Malaysia was consulted to verify the validity and standard of the project brief. Test plans included asking the course co-ordinator to provide a list of students and to divide them equally, according to their previous grades, between two groups. This was to ensure that both groups were balanced in terms of variation of strong, average and weak students.

Design Test II was a reflective practice through discussion with working designers from a design organization called Thinklab©. There were several participants in this session. The approach was conversational, which can enable a valuable group discussion among the participants, who provide feedback, recommendations and critiques. Their input as working designers is critical to my research, enabling a more comprehensive outcome to the book.

Design Test III was undertaken among third-year BA (Hons) Graphic Design students at a private institution in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. This test involved asking the students to use the visual identity guide as a resource in their 1-week design project titled 'Packaging Design Does Matter'. Discussions and reflection about the guide as a supportive tool in the student's creative process and outcomes were discussed after they completed the design project. Details of the tests, discussions and outcomes are discussed in section 4.4.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: Findings and Discussion**

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## 4.1 Recognizing the Complexities of Graphic Design Practice in Malaysia

### 4.1.1 Exploratory study

A search of Malaysia Yellow Pages business listings (<http://www.yellowpages.com.my>) showed the number of companies which advertise themselves as graphic designers, advertising–computer graphics, computer graphics or graphic consultants; all list include graphic design, web design and print in their list of activities, and also advertising agencies, where graphic design practice takes place together with other activities such as public relations, marketing, photography and copywriting, as indicated in Table 4.1.

Category	Quantity (Number of companies)
Graphic Designers	131
Advertising–Computer Graphics	23
Computer Graphics	39
Graphic Consultants	7
Advertising Agencies	423

**Table 4.1.** Listings on Malaysia Yellow Pages (Retrieved from [www.yellowpages.com.my](http://www.yellowpages.com.my)).

On the other hand, Media Guide 2005 (the latest edition available), an advertising and media guidebook, listed 195 advertising agencies in Malaysia. This guide is not then likely to be accurate, because not all agencies are listed. I believe that the guide only provides the names of companies which have paid a fee to the publisher for inclusion. An interview with Tan (2008), the honorary secretary of the Graphic Designers Association of Malaysia (wREGA), revealed that there are no more than 60 registered members. Unlike architects (who are chartered by the Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) (Malaysian Institute of Architects), ‘graphic designer’ is not a legally protected profession, so anyone may call themselves a graphic designer (Waarde, 2009), including freelance designers working from their homes or practitioners employed by other establishments

which require the service of a graphic designer 'in-house' or printing companies, which may not register themselves in associations, inventory sites or directories. The Malaysian Institute of Architects directory 2006 (<http://www.pam.org.my/>), indicates 2786 registered members.

This indicates that there is no detailed documentation or compilation of graphic design companies in the country. Thus there are limitations to the information found in this exploratory study. Although this method is unable to provide figures or estimate the number of graphic design establishments or graphic designers in the country, this exploratory study allowed me to gather some information about graphic design practice in Malaysia. Most of the companies in the existing listings are located within the Klang Valley, indicating that design establishments are set up mainly in the vicinity of city centres and towns. The lack of a national database of designers in Malaysia indicates the need for policy makers to produce a design census to provide information on the design industry.

#### **4.1.2 Cultural probes**

As previously described in Chapter 3.1.2, Gaver et al.'s (1999) method of 'cultural probes' was used to elicit inspirational responses from participants to gain an understanding of the mindset of graphic design practitioners in Malaysian establishments. Gaver et al. claim that this method is appropriate for use in the early stages of a qualitative research project. However, that means the method offers only a limited insight into the designer's practice, which will now be discussed by reference to the particular probe I designed and used with Malaysian graphic design practitioners.

To begin, several graphic design practitioners in Malaysia were contacted via email (see Appendix 1) asking them to participate in a series of creative tasks. The cultural probe package was then posted or delivered by hand (through arrangement with the participant) with a stamped addressed return envelope. The participants were expected to spend 10 minutes each day on the tasks for 7 working days. However, they were allowed ten days to complete the tasks before returning the package. A grace period of another week was given before a follow-up telephone call was made and a further one week was allowed for the participants to return the pack.

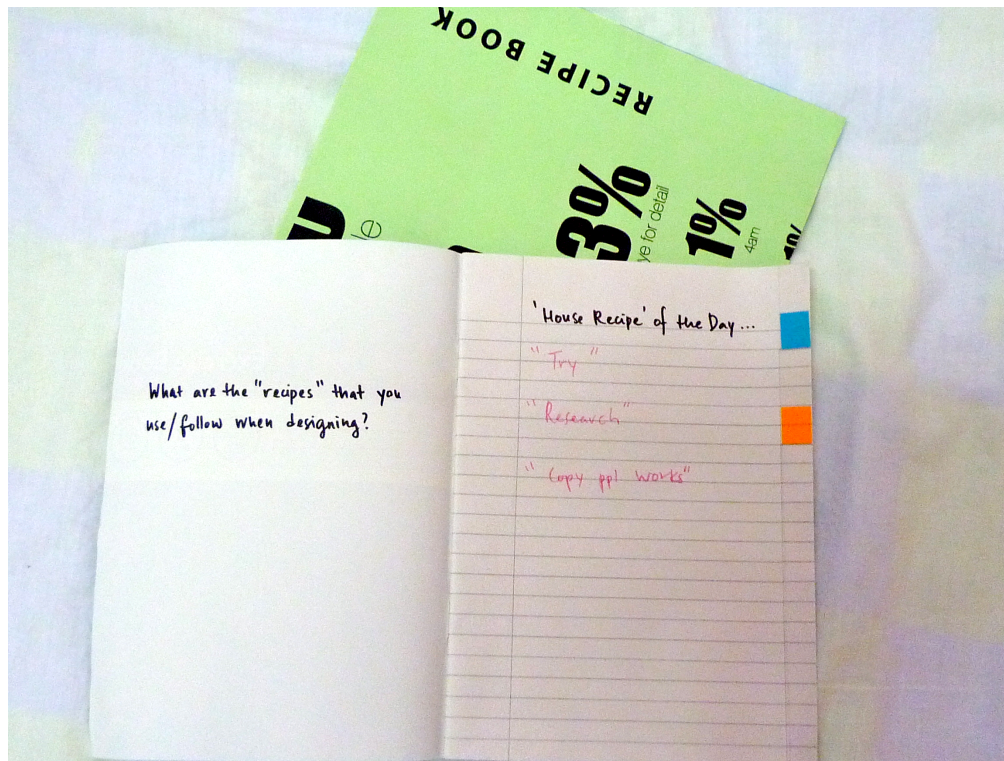
The ten designers who agreed to participate were given a card to thank them for their participation, and to provide instructions for the tasks. Sending instructions in the form of a card was appropriate because it was friendly and casual (Figure 4.1). The colourful envelopes containing tasks for each day of the week were also intended to be inviting rather than challenging.



**Figure 4.1.** Thank you card and instructions.

A few of the probes were derived from the idea of ‘playful triggers’ (Akama, 2008 and Loi, 2005); for example, the ‘recipe book’ (Figure 4.2), animal stickers (Figure 4.3) and ‘The Unwritten Laws of Graphic Design’ (Figure 4.4) (a probe shaped like a book asking each participant to put themselves in the shoes of the author, writing the chapters of the book). This helped to facilitate the engagement between participants and the tasks at hand by putting them in different shoes (roles) to enhance their reflective responses to the various aspects of a graphic practitioner’s practice.

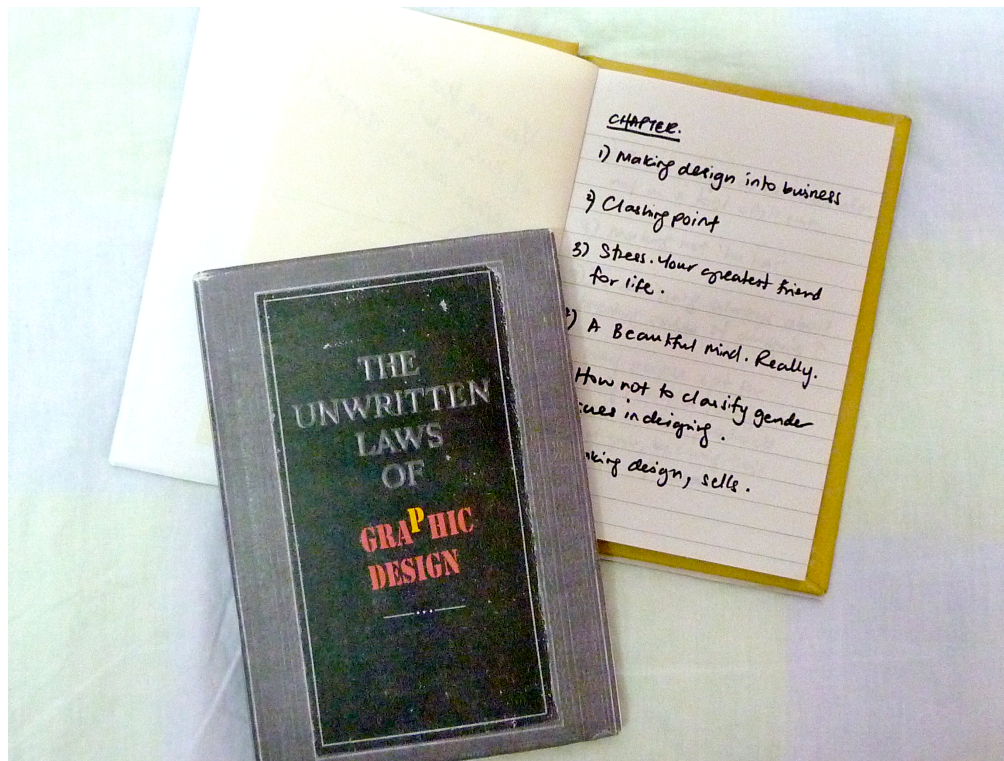




**Figure 4.2.** 'Recipe book' as a probe.



**Figure 4.3.** Animal stickers.



**Figure 4.4.** 'The Unwrittwen laws of Graphic Design' as a probe.

Table 4.2 shows the details of the probes and tasks given to the participants. The returned probes and responses were noted, and initial reflections were made based on the returns.

Probes	The returned probes / response	Initial reflections
<b>Task 1:</b> Name 3 design tools you can't live without	Responses: InDesign software, Photoshop, ruler, cutter, brain, a paper, pen or pencil	It was revealed that basic stationery materials were essentials in the process of designing. Stationery is only almost as important as technology gives speed, which is very important in today's competitive market.
<b>Task 2:</b> Use the image on the other side. How would you sell it to your client? (A picture card)  <i>Given a random image of a Chinese cabbage, the participant had to respond to how they would sell the object to their client.</i>	The word 'fresh' was use by many, with different illustrations on the image. Other responses included ways to promote the item, e.g. direct marketing pack, ingredient in an attractive dish, and also allowing consumers to test it at the supermarket.	Participants mainly responded to the most obvious solution, which was to associate the image with the point of sales.



<p><b>Task 3:</b> The Unwritten Laws of Graphic Design. You are the author of this book! What are the chapters? (A book with empty pages asking participant to fill in a chapter of the book.)</p>	<p>Several participants brought up the issue of the environment – work space/place and surroundings. They felt that it is important for them to work in a conducive environment that will enhance their creative thinking and design process.</p> <p>Most often, designers do not work alone; there are various stakeholders involved. Most of the time, designers do not sell their own designs; this is done by account executives/marketing executive or the like.</p> <p>Designers often complain about becoming the client's victim of ideas. "Whose idea? Designer's or client's? What are the measures that a creative organization can take? Why does a client choose cheaper and less attractive work for their products?"</p>	<p>Business often dominates our design practice. Time is often constricted due to budget. As indicated, quality is also compromised in some companies. Selling a design is often driven by marketing or sales. Much emphasis is placed on how to sell designs or concepts.</p> <p>Client dictates the design outcomes.</p>
<p><b>Task 4:</b> Time: IN OUT (Indicate clock in/out time)</p>	<p>A mix of 'rather standard working hours' (9 am–6 pm) but occasionally working till late (8 pm/11 pm) and flexible working hours applies to practitioners who work in advertising agencies or on a freelance basis. One participant responded "time is irrelevant".</p>	<p>Designers tend to work long, irregular hours.</p>
<p><b>Task 5:</b> Your 'Design Process'... List it, Describe it, Draw it.</p>	<p>Each practitioner had his/her own ways of illustrating their design process with differences and similarities to each of their design process models.</p>	<p>It shows that there is a rather typical model applied by design practitioners or creative organizations, but there are many 'hints' that the design practitioner's own design process is not complete without personal values such as personal preferences for things such as beliefs, food and environment which aid their thought process.</p> <p>There may be differences in the steps involved in the design process depending on the type of design establishment.</p>
<p><b>Task 6:</b> Where will you send your boss on a holiday? (Question was written on the back of a postcard with an image of a place/country.)</p>	<p>More than half of the participants gave a negative connotation, suggesting lack of fondness for their boss. Others named a location without any reasons, gave neutral comments about the reason for the chosen place or gave a place linked to the boss' preferences/likes.</p>	<p>There is an indication about boss–employee relationships, where the designer harbours unfavourable opinions about his/her superior, perhaps due to their different priorities – financial vs quality of design work?</p>
<p><b>Task 7:</b> In the animal kingdom, which animals best represent your boss, your client(s), your co-workers and you? (A set of animal stickers together with a forest background was provided.)</p>	<p>It was found that almost all participants chose an animal which has a strong/big/fierce character/size to represent their <b>Boss</b>, e.g. Lion – <i>"the dominant carnivore in my office. You don't know whether she is smiling or growling sometimes"</i>.</p>	<p>These responses reveal the prevalent hierarchical structure involving various stakeholders in a creative organization.</p>



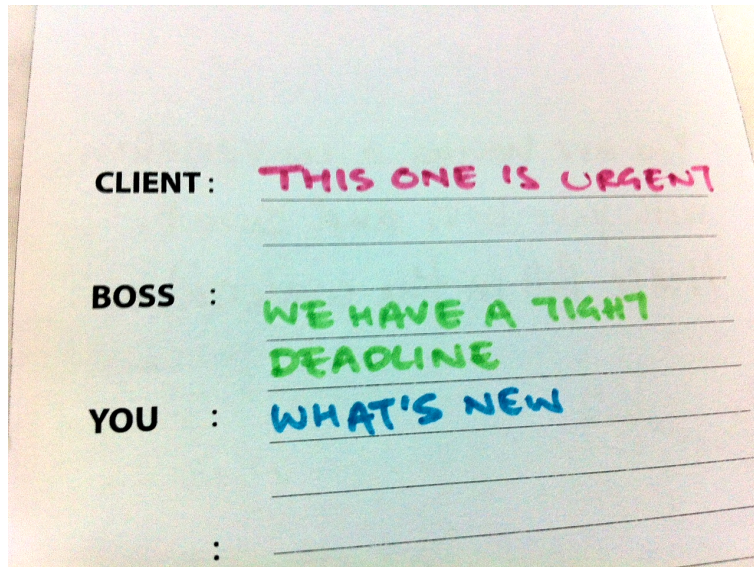
	<p>Parrot – <i>"A representation of the company. Only talks when he feels he needs to. Requires support".</i></p> <p>Responses for Client, Co-workers and participant him/herself were inaccurate as each participant chose a range of different animals with different personalities and characters.</p> <p>However, there are some interesting responses in which the participants explain why he/she chose that particular animal.</p> <p><b>Client:</b>  Monkey – <i>"Think they're smart but they are stupid &amp; annoying. Just sit/sleep/shit, sometimes throw stones/make fun of people".</i>  Snail – <i>"Big ambition, slow action".</i></p> <p><b>Co-workers:</b>  Mandrill – <i>"They are social creatures. Don't be fooled by their colourful outlook, sometimes you don't even realize they stab your butt".</i>  Rabbit – <i>"Need to be chased after in order to run faster".</i></p> <p><b>Participant:</b>  Squirrel – <i>"Just want to do my stuff and stay out of trouble. I want my space!"</i>  Lion – <i>"Still aspire to be..."</i></p>	
<p><b>Task 8:</b> Visualize CREATIVITY</p>	<p>Most participants responded by drawing freely in and/or out of the box; most of them were organic shapes or doodles.</p>	<p>'Creativity' is perceived as infinite, not structured or fixed. Other responses were 'thinking out of the box', and an analogy that 'creativity' is like blowing up a balloon, not knowing its capacity until it bursts.</p>
<p><b>Task 9:</b> What was your progress today?</p>	<p>Response was mostly about completing work on different projects which are at different stages.</p>	<p>Work process involves multiple stages, depending on the type of design establishment and the breadth of the design projects.</p>
<p><b>Task 10:</b> Recipe Book. What are the "recipes" that you use/follow when designing?</p> <p>House Recipe' of the Day... Chef's Special. Name of the Chef:/Specials..."</p> <p><i>(The recipe book was created as a metaphor for method, technique or formula that participants use in their process of designing. 'House Recipe' referred to the specialties of the company/ organization where they work.)</i></p>	<p>Participants responded that the "ingredients"/elements include stationery, ambience (mood) and preferences (having their favourite items).</p> <p>Participants responded to 'Specials' as a particular person/co-worker/ employee in the company with special attributes and the company's specialization, e.g. collage/illustration/special print techniques and customized type.</p>	<p>The practice of graphic design is becoming more cross-disciplinary with various specialist skills within the field.</p>

<b>Task 11:</b> You are having a conversation with your boss and client. Please fill in the conversation.	Most bosses do all the talking and decision making for the designers. Designers mainly have to agree to everything they say or do everything they ask.	Graphic designers positioned at the lower end of the hierarchy, and have to abide to their superiors.
<b>Task 12:</b> 'Awards are merely badges of mediocrity.' – Charles Ives. To what extent do you agree with the statement? What are your recent achievements? (The participants were given a provocative image with a strong statement.)	There were a range of responses from this task; "no time for award shows", "agree with the statement" and no comment (as the participant won a One Show Silver lately).  Interestingly, for a few, recent achievements were improvement in their work, educating a client, involvement in a new type of design-related work and even personal issues such as "putting family above work".	Winning an award may help raise the profile of design and identify talented designers. Winning awards is encouraged in advertising agencies in particular as it will also help reinforce the client's and the designer's unified commitment.  Some designers do see their role in delivering great value to a business through design.
<b>Disposable camera</b> (to capture their work environment and inspiration)	Although instructions were stated, the pictures taken with the disposable cameras were not in sequence. Most pictures were quite dark or not focused.	Results were not analysed as the responses were poor and pictures were low in quality (dark / not focused).

**Table 4.2.** Table indicating the cultural probes tasks, participants' responses and initial thoughts and reflections.

Reflections upon the returned probes that are essential and relevant to the pilot study are further evaluated and discussed. Their thoughts and daily activities show that design practice is always placed within a business context in the design industry. This is exemplified by the probe (Figure 4.5) which asked participants to fill in a conversation between the client, the designer and his/her superior; this indicated that the working pattern common to other corporate establishments in the country in which designers work is long irregular hours, often under pressure and to tight deadlines. It appears that the work culture in private establishments in the country expects long working hours, or where the government does not restrict working hour limits. This is supported by the study by Nagaraj (2004, in Lee et al., 2007) which shows that in Malaysia very long hours are spent in the transport, storage, wholesale, retail trade shows and communications sectors, indicating that all workers in those industries work more than 50 hours per week. Lee et al. (2007) point out that the figures appear quite stunning when compared with the situation in most of the industrialized world, where the retail industry is dominated by

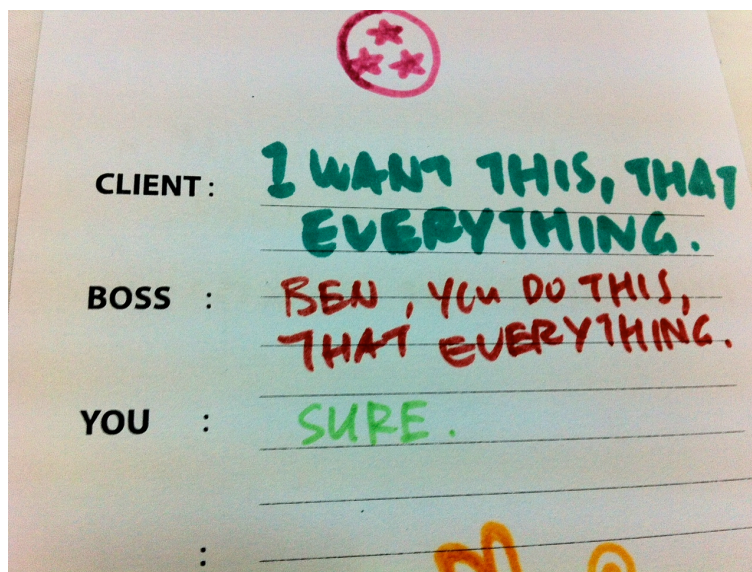
part-time workers in many countries, and hours devoted to transport and storage have been significantly reduced by 'just in time' production and delivery strategies. Therefore, in Malaysia, increasing efficiency appears to be widely viewed as essential to competitiveness.



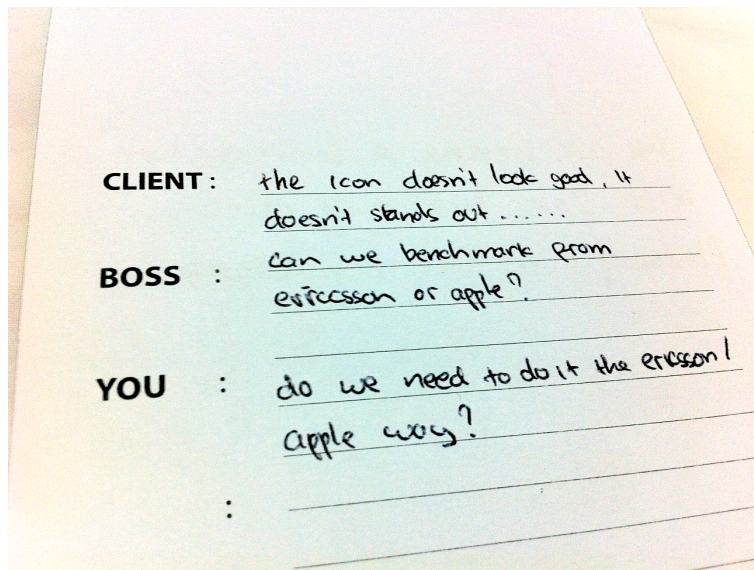
**Figure 4.5.** Conversation: tight deadline.

Figure 4.6 points out that clients have the most authority and designers typically agree to their demands. Service culture appears particularly dominant in Malaysia, where the client has the most power in the decision-making process. Much emphasis is placed upon how to sell designs and concepts by the marketing department and the various stakeholders (sales executive / management / servicing person) involved in a creative process/organization. Therefore, instead of dealing directly with clients, Malaysian designers more typically have to interact on client issues with their own marketing executives who often dictate the outcome of design work. In this situation, certain stages in the design process are sometimes omitted due to the additional time and financial resources needed to support an additional layer of communication between client and designer. Designers also point out that they are often obliged by marketing executives to

comply with those clients who want their product or service to resemble another existing product, as indicated in Figure 4.7, instead of being given the opportunity to negotiate their design strategies and solutions directly with such clients. Designers are also frequently asked to imitate or copy 'Western' or 'Japanese' designs according to their client's preference. This is commonly observed as an issue faced by designers working in small or medium-sized local design companies. This reveals that Malaysian designers' solutions are often driven by their clients' viewpoints that 'Western' (i.e., American or European) or 'Japanese' styles are more appealing and more saleable. This 'me too' attitude in many contracting Malaysian businesses makes it apparent that reference to local knowledge and design is seldom considered in everyday Malaysian design practices.



**Figure 4.6.** Conversation: client authority.



**Figure 4.7.** Conversation: request for design which resembles another existing brand/product.

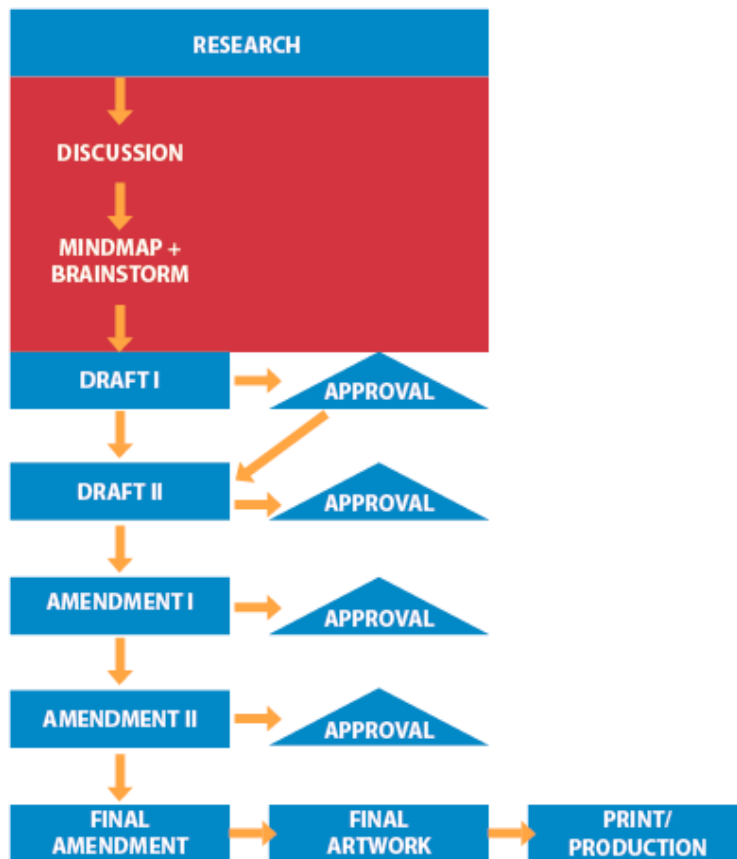
The designer's daily activities also indicate that the role of graphic designers is increasingly evolving, and their tasks are becoming more cross-disciplinary as media converge. The dissemination of visual communication is not limited to traditional media such as print but also encompasses multimedia, motion graphics and social media through the use of the Internet. Although each respondent has his/her own way of illustrating their design process (Figure 4.8), their design process shows that a somewhat typical model (Dubberly, 2004) is applied to their design practice or their creative organization (Figure 4.9). Nini (2004) who has researched and written about the graphic design process claims that investigation, analysis / planning, and synthesis / evaluation are the steps that make up a typical design process (Figure 4.10), and that the highlighted steps (in red) in Figures 4.9 and 4.10 are those usually ignored by graphic designers even though they are critical to any professional practice. He argues that graphic designers should be involved in analysing a client's communications, and finding ways to provide information that is of strategic value, and transforming complicated information into an easily understood form that would be beneficial for both the clients and the end-user. Nini (2004) also proposes that this type of activity requires a focused and well-defined



process to solve a particular problem, and claims that problem solving is what true 'professionals' do.



**Figure 4.8.** Responses on 'design process' illustrated by the participants.



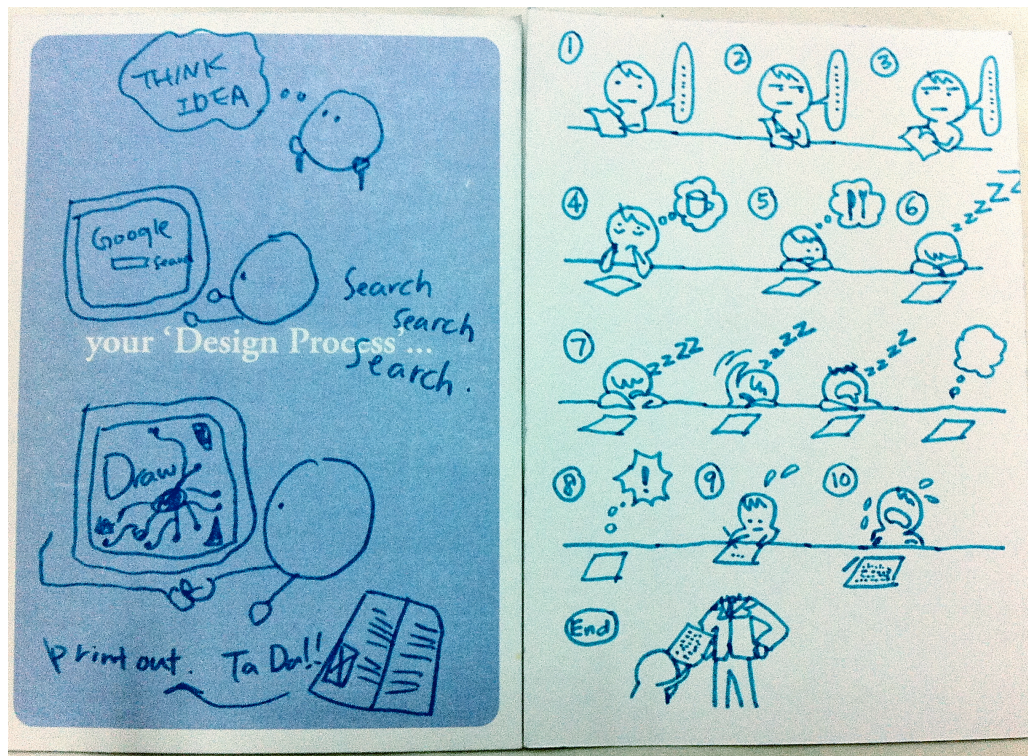
**Figure 4.9.** Diagram of the steps involved in a typical design process illustrated by the participants, as informed by Dubberly (2004) and Nini (2004).



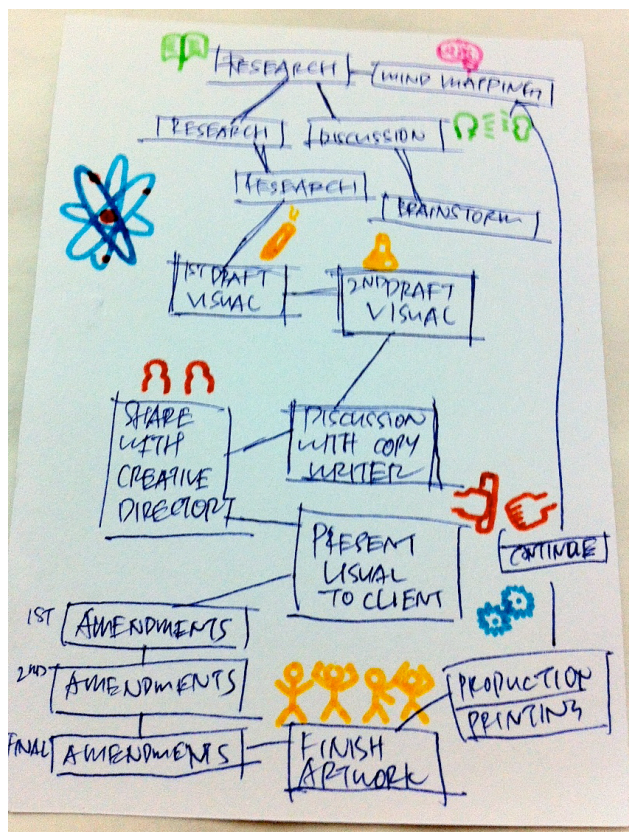
**Figure 4.10.** Design process as suggested by Nini (2004).

However, it can be seen from the returned probes that the graphic designers' process did encompass the steps Investigation, Analysis / Planning, and Synthesis / Evaluation as proposed by Nini (2004). Some designers do manage to communicate with clients, and involve themselves in investigating an issue, analysing the problem, planning or gathering information and finding the best possible solution for the client's needs, although the results from this small survey cannot necessarily be generalized to all local designers. The responses point out that graphic designers who pay a huge amount of attention to the form-making or outcome of a particular project more often overlook the steps highlighted in red, and make less time for thinking through the general design problem due to the time constraint factor in most quick turn-around design projects. This usually happens in smaller companies in which clients have the most authority in the work, and where the company usually deals with below-the-line design work such as brochure design, paraphernalia of promotional materials, business cards and so on. In comparison, the investigation and analysing or planning steps in design consultancies or multinational advertising agencies are often well thought through with the help of market researchers and strategic planners. For example, Figure 4.11 illustrates the work process of designers in a small design company, and Figure 4.12 reveals the work process of a designer in a multinational company in which his work process involves various stakeholders and multiple steps.





**Figure 4.11.** Returned probe: Design process illustrated by designers working in a small design company.



**Figure 4.12.** Returned probe: Design process involving various stakeholders and steps.

The findings of this design-led method of cultural probes reveal that graphic design practice in Malaysia is very firmly placed within a business context where clients appear to have the most authority in the design outcomes. Designs with 'Western' influence are encouraged, while there are limited references to local designs available for graphic design practitioners; therefore the designer's practices are very much dominated by Western lifestyle and media influences. Regardless of the size of the company, hierarchy is an integral part of Malaysian business culture, and graphic designers are usually positioned at the lower end of the hierarchy, expected to work long hours and are presumably not paid well. The process of graphic design practice does not differ from the typical model as informed by Dubberly (2004), but the additional internal layer of marketing restricts the amount of time available to work out solutions best suited to the client's demands.

The cultural probes method that was discussed and presented at many design symposiums and conferences, such as the Design Research conference organized by the Design Research Society that I attended during my research journey, seems like a promising method to employ. As designers do not often reflect or write about their practice, this method can gain insights and information on what they really do or feel about their practice, which bridges the gap between what people say and what they mean. However, this is also one of the constraints of this method as bridging the gap through interpretation, responses can be incorrect or inaccurate. Also, in this research I found that although some respondents felt that the creative tasks were inspiring, not all wholeheartedly participated even though they had earlier agreed to take part in the project. The results were rather disappointing in generating inspirational responses given the time spent designing the tasks, sending them out and awaiting the returns from the

participants. Although previous researchers have identified the limitations of this method (Gaver et al., 2004 and Hielscher et al., 2007), as previously mentioned in section 3.1.2, it would have been more useful if they have evaluated the worth of findings in respect of the time and effort it takes to design and deploy these probes. As this method cannot stand alone, but is appropriate for use with other methods, observations and interviews were further undertaken afforded by the cultural probe investigation.

#### **4.1.3 Observations**

The challenge in adopting this observation method is to make the employees of the companies or organizations feel at ease/comfortable with the investigator's presence. The worst case scenario is when employees start treating the researcher as an 'outsider'. Thus the building of relationships and making the employees comfortable is a gradual process. In my experience it is more difficult in larger organization, as the employees are more cautious with their work and ideas and thoughts and often less willing to share. Thus, the researcher has to be more cautious when dealing with larger numbers of participants and stakeholders in an organization.

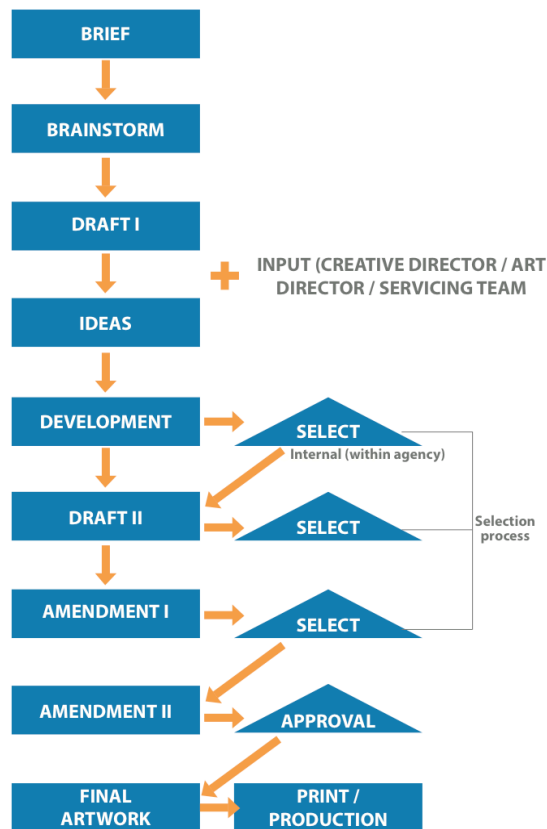
The findings are based on the observation study undertaken in four types of Malaysian design establishments where I engaged in discussions and conversations with a diverse range of design practitioners and professionals from a broad range of roles, background and experience. The investigation was conducted in design companies with established portfolios and which have been established for a significant length of time. The companies are identified and coded as W, X, Y and Z. Companies X and Y can be seen to focus on a number of environmental design projects which include designing sign systems and information design for large-scale property development projects. These

projects include branding and creating an identity for new city developments, and the design activities range from branding and visual strategies to interior and exterior environment design, lifestyle and experience design. The involvement of these agencies in this kind of large-scale design project in which graphic designers contribute to the work of a multidisciplinary team appears in keeping with the Graphic Design Association of Malaysia (wREGA)'s objective which is *“to raise the standards of graphic design and visual communication, its professional practice, and the professional status of the graphic design practitioner”* (wREGA, 2012, p.1). In this respect, companies X and Y are small local companies which have the capability to handle rather large or medium-sized projects when work is subcontracted and delegated to ‘third (other) parties’ with specialist skills.

It is observed that the graphic design industry is becoming increasingly fragmented, influenced by the design industry in the global economy as discussed in Chapter 2.2, where there are many different aspects and specializations within graphic design taking place and these run across the creative and media industries. Many copywriters, translators, visualizers and illustrators work freelance for several different companies. In-house designers or design divisions within companies, which were popular in the late twentieth century, are becoming less common. Many graphic design companies prefer to employ ‘third party(ies)’ depending on the basis of a project.

It is observed that junior graphic designers in company W have little chance to develop their own ideas and design and seem to be executors for their superiors. They are often perceived as people with an eye for design and the accompanying technical skills obtained from their training/education (degree or diploma). Advanced or intermediate

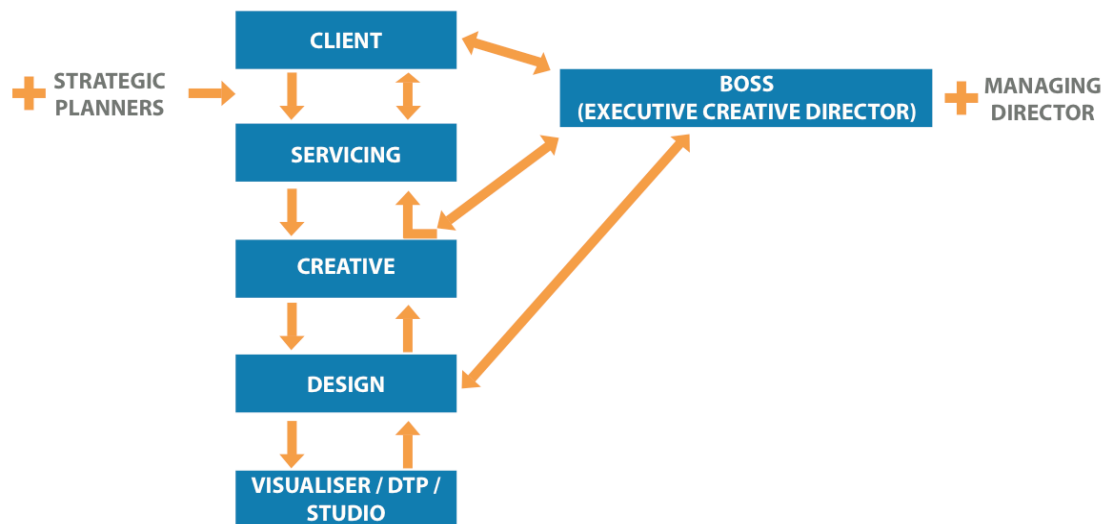
level of basic design software skills – such as Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe InDesign – are required. They are expected to design promotional items such as brochures, newspapers, banners, posters, leaflets, web banners, flyers, advertisements and exhibition booth artwork. The graphic designer's job scope in companies X and Y includes gathering information and materials, idea generation and development, and delivery of design outcomes; he/she often works in a team and is managed or overseen by a senior designer or superior. In large advertising agencies, such as company Z, graphic designers are positioned in a small design department – low in the hierarchy – which is part of a bigger organizational structure. Here, graphic designers seldom work in isolation; the design work is often part of a bigger advertising campaign or project, which usually involves working with other people from different departments or specialist areas. As an example, Figure 4.13 illustrates a typical work process which involves various stakeholders such as the creative director, art director, copywriter and client servicing team. It is observed that steps (investigation, analysing and planning steps) in the design process as informed by Nini (2004) – as discussed in section 4.1.2 – are carried out here.



**Figure 4.13.** Typical work process which includes input from various stakeholders.

It was also observed that the agency investigated – company Z (an international advertising agency) – has introduced a working system called the ‘matrix’ system where the various stakeholders involved in the process report to the ‘boss’, in this case the executive creative director (ECD) of the company who overlooks all design and creative work. The work structure illustrated in Figure 4.14 shows that different stakeholders (the designers, visualizers, desktop publishing artists, art directors, strategic planners and servicing executives) can report to the ‘boss’ at every stage of the process, or when necessary, and do not follow a traditional hierarchical system. The ECD also liaises with the managing director of the company (who focuses on managing the business side of the company) accordingly. This does not mean that there is no hierarchical system for the organization as a whole or that the structure is loosely defined. However, as opposed

to the findings from the cultural probes method, which indicate the significance of hierarchy in the work culture, the interesting observation that emerged was the ‘matrix’ system at company Z which allows the various stakeholders to flexibly report to the ECD has created a sense of competitiveness and self-determination among the various stakeholders; everyone has equal responsibility to perform their best on the tasks at hand.



**Figure 4.14.** ‘Matrix’ system.

I observed that, as with earlier indications (in Chapter 4.1.2) through the probe returns, the average wage for graphic designers at entry level is RM2000 (£400) monthly, unless they work in larger companies. Many graphic designers work full time and also do freelance work on the side. The graphic design industry is mainly dominated by Chinese Malaysians, who mostly accumulate their skills and knowledge through several years of training and professional experience to learn the business with a view to eventually starting their own practice, using their acquired network or contacts in the design industry. This I learned through conversations with several designers who said that they learned through client feedback and continuous experience from design projects being undertaken, as well as improving on their skill sets and knowledge.



Based on my observations and conversations with designers in the design companies, I found that the competencies and educational level of a graphic designer influence the types of design practice he/she undertakes and the organization or company they work for. This observation supports previous reflection on the Malaysian design industry by Kueh (2004), who categorized the industry into different levels according to designers' educational qualifications. Graphic design practitioners with a diploma qualification mostly work as a 'technician' in the design industry. The job title given is usually DTP (desk top publishing) artist, graphic artist or FA (final artwork) artist; they are involved in producing design work which involves minimum conceptual thinking. Kueh (2004) adds that this group of designers often competes with self-taught designers who sometimes work freelance, and who charge "way below levels". Low prices are their main selling point to grab clients' attention and to compete in the design industry. Designers with a Bachelor of Arts degree from a local or an overseas institution tend to work as graphic designers or art/creative directors in local or international design or advertising agencies. Most of these designers have been trained to practise conceptual visual communication and through different media such as advertising, print, publication or multimedia. Some of these designers with a few years' experience in design or advertising agencies pursue the dream of owning their own design company. These designers also have overseas exposure or short stints (in established or international design companies) and are often influenced by global consumer culture, taste and design styles. It is observed that, increasingly, the number of design graduates with Masters (MA) qualification from local institutions is growing. However, designers with an MA are uncommon and design practitioners in Malaysia with a postgraduate degree (PhD) from an overseas institution are very rare, particularly among those working as design consultants. The few designers with a PhD are mostly employed as academics in local universities. It is surprising that design research and its application are not yet evident in Malaysia as supported by Kueh



(2004) and suggested by the design scene in Malaysia, where recently Thinklab© became the first design organization to implement a design thinking programme (in 2011) and to localize its content to fit into the local design scene. However, it is observed that there is a growing design industry which is stirred by groups of young design practitioners who have overseas exposure or have had stints working in international companies who are actively promoting a stronger culture of design in Malaysia.

From my observations, client financial authority is a big issue. As indicated in 4.1.2 and also observed by Comar (2008), clients in Malaysia have to be 'looked after' a lot more than those in the West. He also pointed out that, in addition to work, entertainment and 'sugar coating' is done to please clients and their accounts. As observed in company W, persuasive tactics, such as reducing the 'market rate' for design work, is carried out to heighten business, often compromising the value of design/artwork, thus affecting the design industry as a whole. In addition, the mushrooming of many local companies which charge cheaper prices and provide the work faster has caused the market to become increasingly competitive. To compete in the market, high turnover time is very important. Quality will and can be compromised as a result. In Harald-Wong's (2008) opinion about the Malaysian scene, "*design has become a commodity*". The value of design services can be seen in posters proclaiming 'Free Designing' in print shops which appear to be giving away the design service for free as a way of promoting sales for their core printing products (Figure 4.15). Such free promotions naturally encourage clients who want a piece of design that is simply the imitation of another product or design, to be produced for less money, or even free of charge in the final job costing.



**Figure 4.15.** Printing company with 'free designing' service.

My research, talking to stakeholders as well as making observations within design organizations has highlighted several issues. The designer's work process consistently includes the politics of negotiating the design process, especially when the process involves many stakeholders. In particular, the power dynamics of the client–marketing executive relationship influences and complicates issues of organizational hierarchy and structure. Hidden agendas, perceptions or expectations among employees, the tacit and complex inter-relationships among stakeholders (i.e., clients, designers, account servicing people and planners), and the values of each individual – who they are, how they interact/work and relate to others – affect the work and design process, and this can be even more complicated by factors such as their personal, cultural and belief systems. The companies observed were all majority Chinese staffed and two were Chinese owned; this may explain the sense of obligation felt by the designers working in them, which might not be shared by designers from other ethnic backgrounds. Complex relationships are a

common theme, generating many discussions about building relationships, interpersonal relationships and networking. This theme has also been highlighted in Akama's (2008) exegesis, emphasizing the nature of human activity, the roles people play to produce a communication design outcome. Akama also highlighted the politics and power dynamics among project stakeholders as obstacles and challenges to be overcome within design projects. As exemplified by the observations made about the relationships among various stakeholders in a design project, the issues of human context are often 'messy' and this can vary depending on the culture of the group or society, or in different design establishment.

In summary, the observations made on the practice of graphic design and the graphic design industry in Malaysia reveal that:

1. Client authority is an issue where the emphasis is placed on the bottom line, to produce cheap products or outcomes which compromise the actual value of design and its outcomes to the client compared to the more collaborative interaction that is found in Western-based agencies. It is quite apparent that good design will enhance the probability of an organization and consequently will be advantageous for any nation which is beginning to look at design and innovation as a tool for economic growth. A key design skill identified by Nini (2004) is the ability to guide the client towards choosing a solution that may work better than the one he or she first envisaged.
2. There is no reference to local knowledge and design; design work is very much influenced by Japanese and Western culture, as well as outcomes dictated by client-financial authority. The lack of a clear design identity for Malaysian design

is an issue when there is no look and feel or design approaches used for projects which need a cultural component. This also makes it difficult for people to associate with our national products or designs which have the potential to be exported to the global market, considering that Malaysia is developing into an international industrial hub for assembly and manufacturing.

3. There is an Asian work hierarchy culture, particularly in small and medium-sized agencies or design organizations, where junior staff are hesitant to disagree with their bosses and tend to 'hold their counsel', supported by the study of Jouhki and Paaso (2011).
4. 'Sugar-coating' culture is apparent for non-Western clients (Comar, 2008), where a lot of time is spent entertaining clients to obtain a business deal, but less energy is devoted to guiding the client towards an effective solution that might differ from his or her original expectation.
5. There also appears to be a 'local ceiling' in large international advertising agencies where expatriates (Western / non-Malaysian) are employed to sit in top management positions in the organization, as one designer pointed out that *"it is interesting in an Asian context ... with the whole white supremacy thing ... perceived local impotence"*. Here, it is observed that the perceived notion of local design practitioners is based on the presumption that the expatriate (usually from the United States, United Kingdom or Europe) is more credible, and highly respected by clients and, therefore, design agencies in Asian countries.
6. The research and ideation process is very minimal and limited, particularly in local small or medium-sized agencies (such as company W) where quick and

cheap prototyping is encouraged, and where graphic designers are usually low in the organizational hierarchy, and do not have a high qualifications.

This pilot study illuminated many valuable insights, in particular conversations concerning issues of culture and identity within the complexities of graphic design practice in Malaysia. It revealed a lack of guidance available to design practitioners on the importance of design as a strategy tool which can assist local companies to use design as a differentiation factor to produce better designs, products or services, and this weakens the national effort to create a healthy design culture that can help generate distinctive and differentiated products for local, regional or global markets. I then decided to test these general impressions further by conducting a questionnaire survey with a sample of Malaysian designers, and follow this up with a more in-depth series of interviews with key opinion formers in that community.

#### **4.1.4 Questionnaire**

250 questionnaires were prepared; of these 100 were distributed among the delegates at the Kuasa Power Asia 2009 design conference held on 8–9 August 2009 to a sample that included design practitioners (creative directors, art directors, graphic designers, web designers, animators, illustrators, comic artists, studio managers, interactive producers, creative IT managers, design entrepreneurs), design students and educators from Malaysia. Out of 100 questionnaires, 69 were returned, with 18 of the 69 respondents being keen to engage in further discussion about Malaysian identity. All 69 respondents identified themselves as design practitioners involved in graphic design, a sufficient number to give acceptable confidence that the survey results are relevant (Watson, 2001).

Table 4.3 is a numerical analysis of the number of questionnaires sent out, the returns and the percentages that these equate to:

Outcomes	Number of respondents	Percentage %
Number of questionnaires distributed	100	100
Number of questionnaires returned	69	69
Of the 69 responses:		
Number of questionnaires returned without interest to participate further	51	74
Number of respondents who left contact details to participate further	18	26

**Table 4.3.** Questionnaire responses breakdown.

The relatively low number of respondents who left contact details to participate further might be attributed to the nature of questionnaire surveys, where respondents may wish to keep their identity from the researcher. This may also indicate a small percentage of respondents interested to be further involved in the research.

When designing the questionnaire, several themes were considered:

1. The perception of Malaysian identity among (graphic) design practitioners in Malaysia.
2. What represents their cultural identity and the Malaysian design/visual identity.
3. The level of understanding and awareness of the importance of Malaysian identity and how it is portrayed internationally.
4. The level of use of Malaysian (or local) vernacular/cultural elements in their design

practice.

5. If a toolkit/handbook on Malaysian design would be valuable.

The results in Tables 4.4–4.8 show the answers to the direct questions:

Question 1. Do you care whether Malaysia has an international identity?		
	Response percentage	Response count
Not at all	5.9%	4
A bit	5.9%	4
Don't know	0%	0
Quite a bit	29.4%	20
<b>Very much</b>	<b>58.8%</b>	<b>40</b>
Answered question		68
Skipped question		1

**Table 4.4.** Do you care whether Malaysia has an international identity?

Question 3. Please indicate (tick) who determines the Malaysian identity		
	Response percentage	Response count
Government and policy makers	57.4%	39
<b>Tourism industry</b>	<b>66.2%</b>	<b>45</b>
Private organizations	14.7%	10
Local and independent filmmakers	51.5%	35
Design practitioners (carry out design or design-related work)	57.4%	39
Music scene	45.6%	31
Others; please specify	20.6%	14
Answered question		68
Skipped question		1

**Table 4.5.** Please indicate (tick) who determines the Malaysian identity.

Question 6. If you had a choice between an imported and a 'Made in Malaysia' product, which would you choose?		
	Response percentage	Response count
<b>Imported</b>	<b>62.3%</b>	<b>33</b>
'Made in Malaysia'	37.7%	20
Answered question		53
Skipped question		16

**Table 4.6.** If you had a choice between an imported and a 'Made in Malaysia' product, which would you choose?

Question 8. In typical day to day life as a design practitioner, I _____ incorporate Malaysian (or local) vernacular / cultural elements in my design work:		
	Response percentage	Response count
Never	7.8%	5
Seldom	23.4%	15
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>40.6%</b>	<b>26</b>
Often	28.1%	18
Answered question		64
Skipped question		5

**Table 4.7.** In typical day to day life as a design practitioner, I \_\_\_\_\_ incorporate Malaysian (or local) vernacular / cultural elements in my design work.

Question 9. If there is a toolkit on Malaysian Design or a 'Brand Malaysia' handbook, how likely are you to apply it to your work?		
	Response percentage	Response count
Very unlikely	1.5%	1
Slightly unlikely	3.1%	2
Uncertain	24.6%	16
Slightly likely	24.6%	16
<b>Likely</b>	<b>46.2%</b>	<b>30</b>
Answered question		65
Skipped question		4

**Table 4.8.** If there is a toolkit on Malaysian design or a 'Brand Malaysia' handbook, how likely are you to apply it to your work?



These open-ended questions in Table 4.9 are qualitatively analysed and discussed:

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Question 2. | Name two things that signify Malaysia and the culture.   |
| Question 4. | Name 5 brands that significantly represent Malaysia.   |
| Question 5. | Please describe how you think Malaysia should portray itself internationally.                    |
| Question 7. | a) if you choose imported product, why?<br>b) if you choose the 'Made in Malaysia' product, why? |

**Table 4.9.** Open-ended questions.

It was found that almost 60% of the respondents care greatly whether Malaysia has an international identity. Food and the multifaceted aspects of the Malaysian culture appeared to be the most significant indicators of Malaysia and Malaysian culture. Respondents felt that Government and policy makers as well as the tourism industry determine the Malaysian identity; however, almost in equally measure they felt that design practitioners and local/independent filmmakers can play a significant role in establishing the Malaysian identity. MAS (Malaysia Airlines), Proton (the Malaysian national automobile manufacturer), Petronas (Malaysian national oil and gas company), Perodua (Malaysia's second automobile manufacturer after Proton) and AirAsia (low-cost airline) rank as the top brands that significantly represent Malaysia. It is interesting to note that fairly young brands, such as AirAsia, as well as Pensonic (household appliances) and Old Town Kopitiam – Malaysia's largest *kopitiam* (coffee shop) chain, which was a small Malaysian establishment up until recently but within the last 5 years has been redeveloped to become a more youthful and successful brand – were ranked among the top brands by the respondents.

Although MAS, Proton and AirAsia were identified as brands that significantly represent Malaysia, critically, MAS and AirAsia remained in the service industry and focused on the design experience. Proton, on the other hand, has not been marketed as widely as it could have been in the global market. Ahmad Zainuddin (2012) points out the lack of a ‘family design’ of Proton cars that the consumers can relate to. He felt that there is no clear identity for the cars and lack of consistency in the designs, and therefore the stakeholders must embark on design approaches for Proton. On the other hand, Royal Selangor, a Malaysian brand which has successfully become internationally recognized, remained as a brand for gift products. With advances in technology and innovation, research on new materials for new products, or other consumer products based on pewter can be explored to dominate the new consumer market beyond gift products. At present there is no brand that puts Malaysia in the world market, such as the likes of Samsung and Hyundai brands for Korea.

Some of the responses from Question 5 – “how you think Malaysia should portray itself internationally” include,

- Cultural variety/diversity (*‘rajak’*, melting pot) and harmony/unity.
- Create a powerful identity based on the ‘fusion’ of different cultures, races, religions and beliefs.
- Promote Malaysian products internationally.
- Emphasize that Malaysia is multicultural and rich in heritage and traditions, with many festivals, modern cities, food and shopping havens.
- Malaysia does not have a specific original culture. We have been too influenced by other countries and their cultures for a very long time. We should emphasize our uniqueness of being multicultural.

And some using design as a means of communication:

- culturally based design and products or brands which are higher in quality
- existence in the graphic design world
- through design or with media and advertising
- creating an icon and establishing a colour; not just the 4 colours on the Malaysian flag. e.g., New Zealand with its fern icon

These responses reflect the perceptions of Malaysian design practitioners of their country from a local perspective. The points are taken into consideration in the reflective practice of developing a nation's visual language.

More than 60% of the respondents would choose an imported product if they had a choice between an imported and a 'Made in Malaysia' product. Most chose imported products because they are: 'more renowned / foreign brand', 'better quality', 'feel safe or better', their 'aesthetics'; or they chose local products because they are 'affordable', 'cheaper in price' or 'economical', to 'support own country' or 'local products and their industry'. The responses reflect that many Malaysian practitioners have more confidence in foreign brands than local products for the reasons above. More than 30% of respondents never or seldom incorporate Malaysian (or local) vernacular/ cultural elements in their design work during their typical day-to-day life as a design practitioner. This was also observed in the practice of graphic design in the Malaysian companies, where minimal or no reference to local knowledge is applied in design work. However, about 50% of the respondents said that they are likely to use a Malaysian design toolkit or 'Brand Malaysia' handbook if it is available.

It is worth noting that although the respondent pool comprised students at tertiary design education level and design practitioners or educators, it was found to be unclear to many what it means to have a Malaysian identity. Also, there was no real pattern to the answers when questions regarding what represents their cultural identity and the Malaysian design identity were asked. Designers' responses were very vague regarding their level of understanding and awareness on the importance of Malaysian identity or how it is portrayed internationally. Although there is no clear evidence to make a general conclusion, this indicates that the graphic design industry in Malaysia is still very much in its infancy and Malaysia is far behind in terms of a design nation in comparison to countries such as Singapore and South Korea. Placing emphasis on design thinking and initiatives for the country, as evident in the initiatives undertaken by countries such as Singapore and Korea, will enable local and national brands to grow in the global market. Proper initiatives and design agendas should be put in place to provide guidance to enhance designs, in particular for local manufacturers.

The scope of the sample was limited to design practitioners based in Malaysia and the questionnaire responses were anticipated to generate a wide representation of individuals from the design industry. In reality, it is worth pointing out that the questionnaire response does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the general design industry because most attendees came from private art and design colleges. Thus the general opinions may not comprise the opinions of practitioners from local governmental art establishments and universities due to the low level of participation by the government institutions, which are seemingly disconnected from the design industry.

#### **4.1.5 Interviews I**

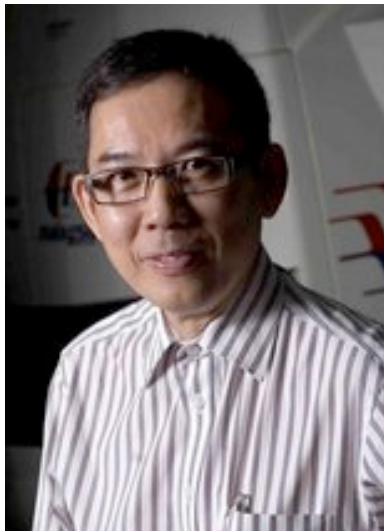
Initial contact and networking with industry professionals and potential interviewees were carried out throughout a period of 7–12 months into my study. This was done through e-mails or social media networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook.

Networking with design practitioners at design conferences and then keeping in contact with them when necessary proved to be beneficial in the research journey. Interviews with several key design practitioners were carried out in December 2008 to understand the development of graphic design practice, how has it evolved and where is it heading in the wake of globalization, and to discover the notion of Malaysian identity in relation to the discussions of the global and the local. The key design practitioners included William Harald-Wong (Figure 4.16), Koh Lee Meng (Figure 4.17) and Daniel Comar (Figure 4.18). Conversations were also conducted with practitioners from the creative industry ranging from art directors, copywriters, graphic designers, account servicing managers and business directors. Their names and positions are included in the text when necessary. Given the prominence of these individuals in the field of branding, their responses provide a useful means of qualitatively cross-referencing the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire survey.



**Figure 4.16.** William Harald-Wong

Principal and design director of WHW & Associates; elected vice-president of ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) in 2001; founder of the Design Alliance (collaborative network of Asian design consultancies); co-founder and past president of wREGA (Graphic Design Association of Malaysia); frequent speaker at international and regional conferences.



**Figure 4.17.** Koh Lee Meng

Founder and design consultant of Koh Design Consultants; president of wREGA (Graphic Design Association of Malaysia) 2008–2009; design consultant at Malaysia Airlines in-house design studio; pioneer of graphic design as a vocation in Malaysia.



**Figure 4.18.** Daniel Comar

Regional executive creative director at OgilvyAction Asia Pacific; Executive creative director at Ogilvy & Mather Malaysia 2004–2009.

According to Comar (2008), the graphic design industry has been constantly evolving since the emergence of formal art institutions in the 1960s. However, it was not consistent compared to the advertising industry, which is largely monopolized by international advertising agencies and operates with global standards, said Comar. *“There are an increasing number of graphic design practitioners compared to twenty years ago, when the practice was considered more exclusive”*, claimed Harald-Wong (2008). However, in terms of the development of graphic design practices in this era, there are an increasing number of upcoming designers with experimental design or cross-disciplinary work who are thriving, developing a niche market. These designers are made popular by the active media industries and entertainment or event magazines / publications. The influence of information and communication technologies also allows the acquisition and dissemination of information across the globe promoting the works of designers, and also of independent (indie) filmmakers. Design is promoted more following the rise of Web logs (or blogs) and social network sites as free tools of media communication. Harald-Wong (2008) believes that through the process and evolution of technologies,

graphic designers can, through their works, gradually influence the public and guide the aesthetics of society. However, as Koh (2008) pointed out, unlike engineers, architects, lawyers and accountants, graphic design is not recognized as a professional practice. There is no professional body that has much authority in the practice such as PAM (Malaysian Institute of Architects) for architects, Board of Engineers Malaysia for engineers, ACCA for accountants and so on. In fact, even interior designers are more sought after because they are constantly advertised in relation to lifestyle, connected to homes, development and property. On the other hand, Koh (2008) believes that with increased involvement in environmental design, information design, service design and sustainability issues, graphic designers can increase the professionalism of their practice.

The practice of graphic design is also becoming increasingly cross-disciplinary as more and more people of different specialist groups work together. In the interview, Harald-Wong (2008) shared insights about his city branding and development project. He talked about his evolving graphic design practice through the projects,

... involves graphic design and urban design work in which many different specialist groups work together. I am able to speak the language ... same wavelength with architects. My work includes developing landscaping concepts (landscape design / feel of the walk) and collaborating with others on the town planning.

Therefore, the scope of graphic design is ever evolving, and becoming wider as it needs more people with different specialist skills working together. Harald-Wong worked together with architects, town planners and landscape designers. Koh's project included increasing environmental design projects; Koh (2008) commented, "*this niche market situates between the clear line of interior architecture and graphic design*". Therefore, graphic design is disseminated across many industries and it is now an urban phenomenon to promote



the principles of engaged integration between all the design disciplines such as architecture, interior design and multimedia, which facilitates communication and interaction.

When discussing design education, the general opinion of the interviewees was that the educational institutes are not producing graduates who are fit for the industry. Although there are increasing numbers of design graduates annually, they believe that the standard of design education is declining. The role of education institutions in developing the necessary knowledge and skills of future designers is questioned. However, the competency level of a designer has to take into consideration his or her educational background; art education is not taught in most Malaysian schools. Koh (2008) pointed out that there is no standardization within the graphic design education system. There are both local and private institutions for graphic design tertiary education in Malaysia. Both diploma and degree courses – either local or franchise courses from the United Kingdom and Australia – are offered at several private colleges. Thus the standard of the graduates also varies. He believes that the Graphic Design Association of Malaysia (wREGA), as an external professional organization, can play a role in the assessment of students' work. However, there are many internal/external issues, including assessment criteria which are already set out within the institution as well as the partner institution (overseas). It is believed that students in Malaysian institutions tend to follow their lecturer's ideas or comments and make amendments accordingly. Like Koh, I believe this is part of a Malaysian (or Asian) culture that has become accustomed to the 'spoon fed' system. I observed that this scenario is caused by students who feel that they would not acquire a certain (high(er) / passing) grade if they defy their lecturer's opinions. It is common for Malaysian students to assume that their lecturers know best; this discourages students

from critical thinking and defending what they believe in. Harald-Wong (2008) also commented that there are several government institutions such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) providing graphic design education at tertiary level, which “*seem to be disconnected with the industry*”. Koh (2008) added “*there is no room for them to venture in the industry*”. The comments mean that the graduates are not sought after, and perhaps not trained well enough for the design industry. This ties in with the observation (in Section 4.1.3) made about the graphic design industry which is dominated mainly by Chinese Malaysians, rather than Bumiputera designers or graduates from government institution.

The interviewees were not sure how to define the Malaysian identity. However, a discussion ensued. Harald-Wong (2008) criticized the Malaysian school system which “*denies its history and denies us of our identity*”. To a certain extent, symbolism and elements from the historical past, such as the Hindu-Buddhist heritage and other kingdoms before Islam arrived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, are not often spoken about due to political barriers. He added that Malaysia is promoted externally as an Islamic country while Indonesia, on the contrary, embraces the inclusiveness of its multicultural Islam. Shan (2008), creative group head in an international advertising agency, echoed Harald-Wong’s (2008) opinion, “*we have been denied of our heritage and history*”. He pointed out that Malaysian identity is being portrayed in government projects such as the modern architecture in Putrajaya (the new federal government administrative centre), which does not reflect Malaysian culture and heritage, but Middle Eastern culture. “*The Mosque itself is ‘alien’ to us, foreign in its shape and form,*” Shan (2008) exclaimed. He argued that it is Middle Eastern in style, most likely due to the increasing ‘Islamization’ of Malaysia. It could also be because of heavy investment programmes from the Middle East. Shan (2008) criticized the lack of information in the archives about Malaysia before British colonialism and the transition

to independence – “*that is our visual arts history!*” he claimed. He felt that a Malaysian identity exists but society does not know how to use or integrate it due to social-political issues. With the lack of a visual history, designing in Malaysia often imitates Western style. Together with the increased dissemination of information through global networks and the influence of global consumer trends, consumers are exposed to similar kinds of ideas, styles, and trends.

When asked about having a Malaysian identity in design work, Harald-Wong (2008) said that only a few design companies are specialized in ‘design for art and culture’. In this global age, design companies must be able to produce designs of an international standard which can compete globally but, when dealing with projects that need a cultural component, it is valuable to have research and documentation in ‘design for art and culture’ which can be channelled into visual identity, culture and heritage or marketing programmes, e.g., development projects that depict traditional Malay lifestyle, dance festival promotions, culture and heritage awareness campaigns, local photography exhibitions and city or place branding projects. Harald-Wong’s (2008) cultural work includes a book design on Southeast Asian cultures for a paper merchant client, poster designs for a collaborative event by the British Council and the Malaysian Ministry of Education, and designing sign systems for state museums. Koh (2008) shared information about his involvement in a rebranding project for Malaysia Airlines (MAS) cabin crew uniform. A group of famous traditional <sup>2</sup>*batik* designers were first asked to take on the task (Figure 4.19). Koh was later appointed to the role of advisor and

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<sup>2</sup> Batik is a fabric printed by a traditional method of hand-printing textiles by coating with wax the parts that are not to be dyed.

corporate brand custodian on branding and its application, providing corporate guidelines and instruction which the traditional batik designers lacked. He advised on colour and identity as the traditional batik designers did not have the intrinsic knowledge about brand or branding that is extremely crucial for the national airline.



**Figure 4.19.** Batik and Malaysia Airlines uniform.

Chew (2008), creative group head at an international advertising agency, said that local flavour which is beginning to appeal to the global scene can be seen in advertisements particularly from India, Thailand and Japan. For example, Thailand's advertising style is often flavourful and slapstick, while Japanese is *kawaii* (over the top cute or unusual). Comar (2008) commented that, in comparison with Thailand which produces unique and great commercial work and has an established cinema industry, Malaysian advertisements lack a certain identity as well as expertise and talent. He added: "*Government laws certainly affect the fact that there are so many sensitivities ... the work tends to be safer as it cannot cross any boundaries ... therefore, the work needs to go with the flow... follow what everybody is doing and not*

*being unique.*” He commented that art and creativity are cultural products; great work cannot be produced if the culture of a society is bound by certain laws which are not totally free. He claims that, besides advertising, the lack of a Malaysian identity is also becoming apparent in visual arts, theatre and films.

Chew (2008) claimed that Malaysia’s advertising style lacks local content and often imitates a Western style, but there are exceptions: Petronas, a local oil and gas company is well known for its cultural advertisements with local insights; the advertisements are mainly broadcast during festive seasons. Nearly all the advertisements are themed to reflect Malaysia’s rich multi-cultural heritage and a sense of racial integration (Figure 4.20). Shan (2008) added, “*for now, the Petronas advertisements are considered Malaysian*”. The successful ad campaigns heightened the company’s sales dramatically, and increased the scope of their demographics. Previously their customers were predominantly Malays. Other races were sceptical and would not patronise Petronas petrol stations, perceiving Petronas as a distinctly Malay brand. However, <sup>3</sup>Yasmin Ahmad’s advertisements for Petronas which promoted racial harmony and the spirit of *muhibbah* (goodwill) in the multi-racial society have changed the mindset of other races (the Chinese, Indians and Others) about the Petronas brand. The advertisements, produced annually during festive seasons, used a cinematic approach portraying the culture and lifestyle of either traditional or modern approaches to the festival, including the ethics and values associated with the cultural group (Ang, 2009). International advertising agencies have

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<sup>3</sup> Yasmin Ahmad (7 January 1958–25 July 2009) was a film director, writer and scriptwriter from Malaysia and was also the executive creative director at Leo Burnett Kuala Lumpur. Her television commercials and films are well known in Malaysia for their humour, heart and love that cross cross-cultural barriers, in particular her advertisements for Petronas, the national oil and gas company. Her works have won multiple awards both within Malaysia and internationally. However, in Malaysia itself, her films are highly controversial since they depict events and relationships seen as forbidden by social conservatives, especially hard-line interpretations of Islam (Jalil Hamid, 2007).

local cultural advisors who advise on local content when dealing with local vernacular or idioms and cultural sensitivities, in particular advertising campaigns. Local cultural advisors in an advertising agency, Poon (2008) and Yusof Osman (2008) explained that research on local knowledge is increasingly important. Within the Asian region, although some cultural values may be similar, there are also some which differ. Lifestyle, religion, taboos, favourite colours and consumer behaviour or habits are among the information that needs to be gathered when designing. It would be useful if such information on culture and identity was collected and documented as reference material for local design practitioners.



**Figure 4.20.** Petronas cultural advertisements.

Yasmin Ahmad's independent films which have won numerous international awards; *Sepet* won the Best Asian Film Award at the 18th Tokyo International Film Festival 2005 and Best Film for the Créteil International Women's Film Festival in France, was criticized by some parties in Malaysia due to some of the 'expressions', which were deemed to touch upon a sensitive issue. *Sepet* is a romantic comedy about the love between a Chinese boy and a Malay girl (Figure 4.21). The film gives both the local and,

particularly, the non-Malaysian, audience a taste of Malaysian village and town lifestyle; the subtle Malaysian characteristics include the use of slang terms and vernacular language. The main plot is about an interracial relationship (a common issue in Malaysia) presenting somewhat biased perceptions about people having inter-racial love relationships. From a certain perspective, the film includes cynical remarks about Malaysian society: it offers a critique in reference to today's teenage Malays and their obsession with Western celebrities; the Malaysian government's perceived biased treatment in handing out scholarships to non-Bumiputeras was also subtly embedded within the dialogue and plot in the film.



**Figure 4.21.** *Sepet* by Yasmin Ahmad.

When asked about the notion of global–local in advertising, Comar (2008) commented that many clients like the ‘one’ campaign idea which can be adapted in different countries. It is more likely for a global brand with international values to advertise its product similarly everywhere, such as Sony flatscreen TV or Apple – technology

products which offer universal shared experiences that have a transcendent quality; the global message can therefore be universal. However, even then, the retail appeal or advertising will look different in terms of layout and other additional details to cater to the different marketing requirements of different countries. Other industries, such as food categories, could not feasibly employ this strategy because food is nearly always linked to the locality of consumers. Comar (2008) pointed out: *“Especially in the past, there was a craze to develop one universal advertisement that can be adapted in different languages and to be broadcast everywhere ... but this is not realistic because it is hard to cross certain barriers. The market situation for the product might not be the same.”* Walker (2008), creative director in an international advertising agency, added *“we are definitely moving towards global-local ... global idea, local adaptations”*. One example is ‘Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty’, a successful global campaign that focused not on the product, but on a way to make women feel beautiful regardless of their age and size (Brodbeck and Evans, 2007). The global idea was adapted in different countries. Figure 4.22 shows the different application of that idea in magazine advertisements in America and in Asia. In contrast to the American advertisement, which showed a naked woman, the Asian adaptation featured an Asian woman who looked confident in her Asian-style tunic top/blouse. The focus was on her facial expression. An advertisement featuring a naked woman would have been deemed too provocative in the Asian context and banned.





**Figure 4.22.** The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty print advertisement using women over the age of 50: Left – advertisement in America, and Right – advertisement in Asia.

Comar (2008) believes that culture is something very strong – a way of being; therefore, design work may be universal but some aspects will remain local. He added that people want products or services that are different and specialized. Thus the future of graphic design in Malaysia inclines towards ‘glocalization’ as culture is important. Harald-Wong (2008) pointed out that *“Cultural knowledge is the key to meaningful and significant design.”* He believes that culture is significant, whether it is shared or not. Comar (2008) predicted that there will be a lot more digital work in the next decade; the medium will be moving towards more digital, interactive and integrated media. Stories will be told in multiple channels: TV commercials, print, online and mobile phones are all feasible means of communication. He added that globalization of communication is a link to culture where the way in which a culture understands itself will be reflected in the communication.

The key points drawn from the interviewees' responses highlighted that:

1. The graphic design profession is still not recognized as a professional practice compared to other design-related disciplines such as architecture. However, the field is increasingly being recognized and does not have to be part of large advertising agencies. Some established design consultancies are seen to be working on large-scale design and identity projects, both locally and internationally.
2. There is still a lack of funding and support from government and policy makers who have yet to take measures to promote design more extensively, as can be seen from the lack of support for locally produced independent films, such as the works of international award-winning film-maker Yasmin Ahmad.
3. Most graphic design graduates from government higher education institutions are not well respected by the design industry while the design education in many Malaysian institutions is still very much based on the 'spoon-fed' system. In line with the notion of design thinking for nation growth, creative thinking can be embedded into the (primary and secondary) public school curriculum, while art and design institutions of higher learning can develop and focus on design initiatives.
4. The emerging Malaysian identity portrayed by the government projects in Malaysia is very much influenced by Arabic Islamic art and design. Besides the economic factor of appealing to Middle Eastern investors, this is also in part due to the lack of guidance and archival documentation of Malaysian cultural identity

and heritage. This situation does not differ from other postcolonial nations such as India, where Professor Sinha (in *Letters Eye* 66, 2007) states that there has been hardly any design documentation of Indian learning, techniques and ideas although India has a rich and evolved heritage. Critically, design is not a new concept in India or Malaysia, as it has been there since the beginning of their culture. As we move onto the global stage, it is said that fewer and fewer visual elements that are distinctive to a particular culture or nation can be seen in graphic design. However, with the effects of both colonialism and globalization, it is unlikely that we will jump towards a globalized single design culture. As Heskett (2004) points out, vernacular culture embodies the identity of a place. How then can we make visible this unique Malaysian nation that is derived from the blending of differing cultures to reflect Malaysian identity, and develop designs which include the use of colours, decorative elements as well as the nation's visual language?

5. Cultural advisors are useful in providing information about particular local cultural sensitivities or taboos when working on localized adaptations of global designs or campaigns. As exemplified by the case of the MAS batik design, the local knowledge and skills of traditional craftspeople should also be documented to build initiatives where design practitioners can work collaboratively for research and development in producing new products or design which are usable for contemporary culture. This idea was also highlighted at the recent ICOGRADA Design Week 2012 conference in Kuching, Sarawak, where a panel of experts emphasized the importance of preserving traditional practices and the need for local knowledge, and for national and cultural products which define a sense of local identity so these can serve as a new model for global

competitiveness. This key debating point is also taken up by Hara (2007) who believes that culture will soon become the most competitive asset in the world economy.

Thus the multifaceted aspects of Malaysia – including colonialism, the multiracial society, the education system and political issues – influence the complexities of graphic design practice in Malaysia. One of the key discussions during the interviews was the notion of a national agenda to define a Malaysian identity in art and design. The practitioners were uncertain about Malaysian identity and, hence, this raises the question of who should determine the country's brand identity in order to contribute to building a nation brand and strategies of nation building.

Interviews II were carried out with members from the Malaysia Design Council to investigate the policy makers of the country's brand identity and to further understand the role of the Design Council and government ministries.

#### **4.1.6 Interviews II**

The interview guide approach was deployed; topics and issues were emailed to the interviewees prior to the interview (see email sample in Appendix 3). This method was considered appropriate because it increases the comprehensiveness of the data (Patton, 1990). It provides a systematic way of collecting data while keeping the interview session fairly conversational, which provides room for interviewees to give personal opinions and/or anecdotal suggestions without moving away from the question in hand.

Interviews with the secretariat and council members of Majlis Rekabentuk Malaysia

(MRM) (Malaysia Design Council ), including Ahmad Haji Zainuddin (chairman) (Figure 4.23), Futom binti Shikh Jaafar (senior general manager) (Figure 4.24) and Ian Howard Davies @ Iskandar Abdullah (council member) (Figure 4.25) were conducted in March–April 2010.



**Figure 4.23.** Ahmad Haji Zainuddin

Chairman of Majlis Rekabentuk Malaysia (Malaysia Design Council); Dean, Faculty of Art, Computing and Creative Industries, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia; PhD in graphic communication, Manchester Metropolitan University, 1992.



**Figure 4.24.** Futom binti Shikh Jaafar

Senior general manager of Majlis Rekabentuk Malaysia (Malaysia Design Council) secretariat.



**Figure 4.25.** Ian Howard Davies @ Iskandar Abdullah

Technical advisor of Majlis Rekabentuk Malaysia (Malaysia Design Council); managing director of Arcradius Consulting Sdn. Bhd. Malaysia.

The Malaysia Design Council (MRM), established in 1993, is governed by the Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM), under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI), and is very much focused on product design. The council aspires to produce Malaysian made innovative design products that can compete at an international level and to promote Malaysia as an international creative and innovative hub. MRM's chairman, Ahmad Zainuddin (2010) stated that the council members consist of mostly senior government people who do not have design backgrounds, and that its composition is rather political. At the present time, MRM only has rather restricted resources and funding. He added that the role of MRM is limited and the council lacks authority because it is still under SIRIM.

Ahmad (2010) clarified that there is no visual guide or identity manual on how to portray Malaysia externally. He noted that the Petronas Twin Towers has been used consistently and is established as an icon that represents Malaysia as modern and Islamic as it adopted Islamic geometric forms and traditions. In the past, the Malaysian moon-kite (*wau*) was

used as an icon, and the logo of Malaysia Airlines is based on this. This unique Malaysian symbol, which is emblazoned on the national carrier, has been used successfully to symbolize 'controlled flight'. Initiatives to represent Malaysia externally through a strong visual identity are scarce, scattered and, except for tourism campaigns, have not been consistent. Ahmad (2010) explained that as a whole, Malaysia does not have a brand statement except that it is a fast developing nation that desires to become a developed nation. He said "*Malaysia is a progressive, modern, Islamic nation*" and added "*at this point in time, Islamization is strong*". Ahmad (2010) suggested that there is a need to combine our postcolonial heritage and the current state of the nation to enhance the nation's standing. He added "*We cannot disregard the indigenous values and the postcolonial civilisation ... we inherited a lot from the British due to their colonisation.*"

Futom (2010) explained that Malaysian furniture exports were huge in the past but neighbouring countries such as Vietnam are moving at a faster pace; thus, Malaysia has lost its foothold in this market because it is unable to develop new innovative manufacturing methods. However, in comparison, graphic design and animation in Malaysia are moving progressively. Ahmad (2010) suggested that for Malaysia to move towards the global economy, design work can have a local flavour but it must also be of a global standard for it to be accepted globally and to penetrate the global market. However, Futom (2010) added that, as the industry is mainly price-driven, well-designed products are not celebrated; at the present time, the government, education sector, clients and the design industry do not necessarily see their role as being to change things. "*Although the country is moving towards a knowledge economy, the focus on design, creativity and innovation is still in a similar situation as before*", explained Davies (2010). In comparison, Singapore is more structured and is moving progressively to a knowledge economy.

Futom (2010) pointed out that the success of LG and Samsung changed the peoples' mindset about Korean design. Elsewhere, Malaysian designers such as Jimmy Choo, Bernard Chandran, Zang Toi and Ken Yeang are well known internationally but are not as well celebrated in Malaysia.

When asked about who determines the policy of a nation brand or the national visual identity, it was surprising that Davies (2010) responded that *"we never discussed MRM's role in shaping the national identity, nation brand and national visual identity"*. However, there have been initiatives by several establishments, such as the recent '1Malaysia' campaign by the Prime Minister's office, emphasising ethnic harmony and national unity, focusing upon the Cabinet, government agencies, and civil servants in order to envelop issues on race and religion in the country. Several national campaigns such as 'Proud to be Malaysian', 'Reach Out – Caring is Sharing' and 'Malaysia Boleh' have also been carried out, but are considered nation-building campaigns targeting Malaysians. On the other hand, advertising campaigns by the Tourism Ministry such as the well-known tourism campaign 'Malaysia Truly Asia', which highlights Malaysia's various cultures, have targeted tourists.

Davies (2010) also pointed out that the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture Malaysia (MICCM), which is headed by Rais Yatim, often plays a small role in promoting the arts and design discipline / industry. Various ministries and other bodies play a role in promoting Malaysia one way or another, in big or small ways, and there are also associations which represent particular design disciplines. However, the arts and design industry is very segregated; there is no body that collaboratively and strategically



focuses on design across all disciplines. Thus there is no national design body to strategically project a consistent image of Malaysia to the outside world. The general opinion (of the interviewees) was that the role of MRM has to be redefined to support the government's objectives as Malaysia moves towards a knowledge economy.

I found throughout the interviews with members of the design council that most responses dealt with product design or its market. This reflects the focus of MRM on furniture and product design. However, it was enlightening to hear that MRM is in the process of redefining its role because it must not be limited to product design (as it has been in the past, and still very much is at present) but should stand as a governing body for design across disciplines.

The interview sessions provided information that enhances the understanding of the role the Malaysia Design Council and the policy makers play in the country's brand identity.

The interviews showed that:

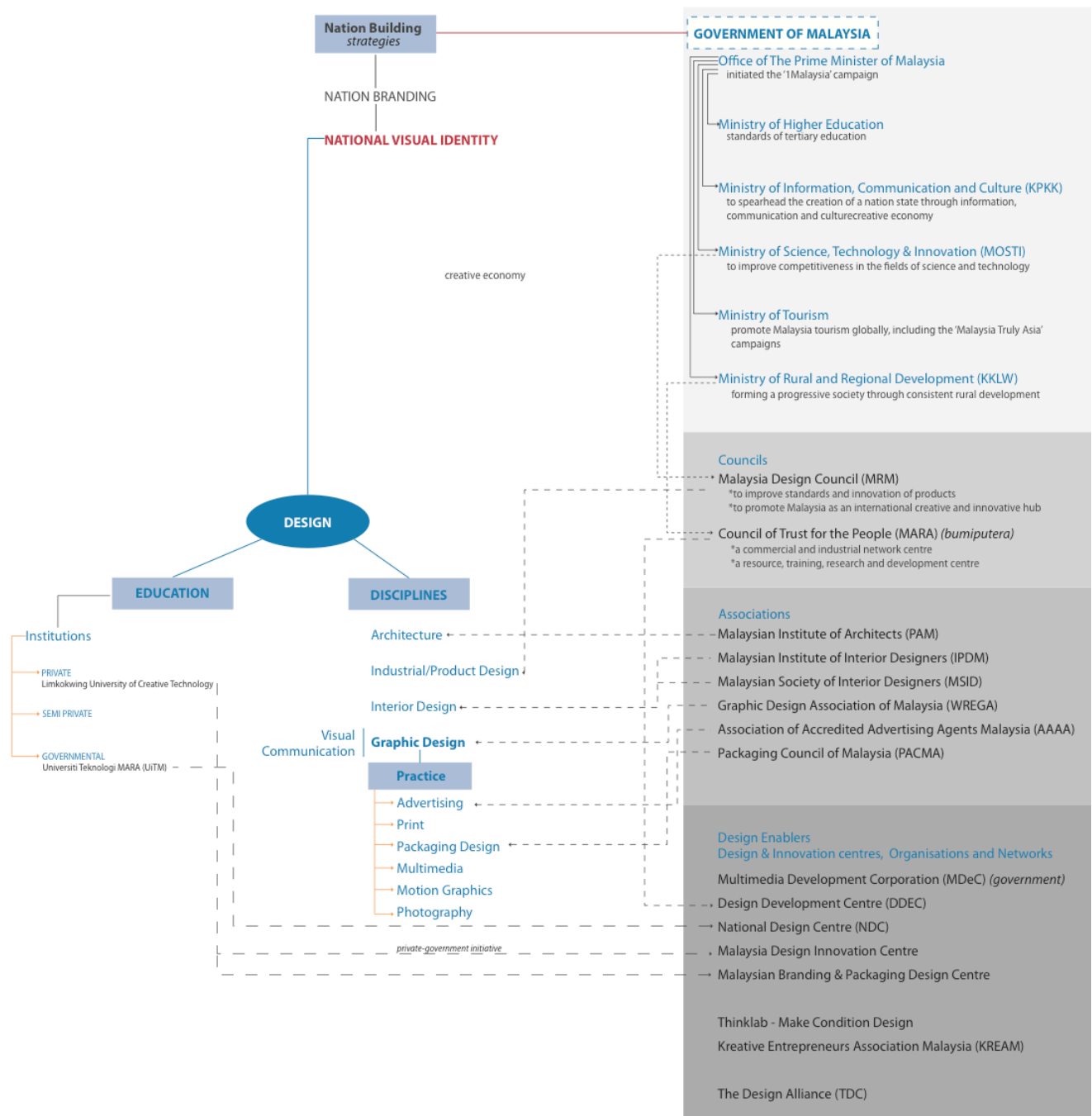
1. There is no visual identity manual and no brand statement for Malaysia to be portrayed externally, except for tourism campaigns. This suggests that the implementation of a visual identity guide for Malaysia would provide design practitioners with a reference to visual strategies and consistent brand identity for the nation.
2. There is a lack of institutional framework for the Malaysia Design Council and only scattered approaches from different bodies with vested interests. This point is evident from the increasing number of young design practitioners working in

the public and private sectors who have made initiatives to promote design in the context of cultural development and innovation.

3. Although there are a number of actions from creative industries organizations, there is a lack of concerted effort to generate meaningful results for design practices due to the political hierarchy within the governmental framework, as Ahmad (2010) expressed that the role of MRM is limited and the council lacks authority. MRM can be better integrated within a national design policy.
4. MRM is hampered by lack of government funding, which prevents it initiating research on local design to be exported to the international market. This is crucial because there is increased competition from other nations within the Asian region. Designs rooted in cultural significance must be considered as potential exports for the global consumer market as they will be more socially credible and sustainable (Sasaki, 2010).

## 4.2 Critique: Working with National Government Framework

Figure 4.26 shows the current structure of the Malaysian design scene where the ministries listed are those involved in promoting Malaysia and related to the design and creative industries. Below the ministries is the council(s), which acts as an advisory body and is governed by one of the ministries above. At the following level, there are professional bodies or associations that generally aim to promote design excellence and professional practice in each particular design discipline. Below them are design centres which are linked to government or private-government institutions; these are part of a set of initiatives set up to encourage design development and innovation. Then there are organizations at the design community level set up as platforms for communication, discussions on design knowledge and creative thinking that mainly hold design-related events. These organizations, some of which are non-profit and non-political, are called design enablers.



**Figure 4.26.** Mapping the Malaysian design scene: Visualizing the connections between key design counterparts and establishments.

There are several design or design innovation centres and agencies governed by separate divisions in different ministries with their own sets of mission and vision. One example, the Design Development Centre (DDEC) ([www.ddec.my](http://www.ddec.my)), a centre for branding, product and design development, is a subsidiary of Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA)

(Council of Trust for the People), a government agency which aims to raise the status and dignity of Bumiputeras through various economic, educational and social activities ([www.mara.gov.my](http://www.mara.gov.my)). MARA is governed by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKLW), which aims to form a progressive society through consistent rural development. The aims and objectives are unclear and not strategically in line with the hierarchical structure, which therefore reveals weaknesses in the system. The initiatives of ministries, governing bodies and agencies with different design centres are scattered and do not work collaboratively. The nature of the design field itself is wide-ranging; thus it is impossible for just one particular ministry to manage it. However, the current design network structure segregates design initiatives and has substantial weaknesses in its non-aligned aims and objectives.

In 2009, the International Design Scoreboard, supported by the UK Design Council and conducted by University of Cambridge, ranked Malaysia in the 40s ([www.designscoreboard.org.uk](http://www.designscoreboard.org.uk)), while the United Nations' Creative Economy Report for developing countries ranked Malaysia as seventh (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2010). Thailand was ranked fifth and Indonesia was eighth. It has been suggested that Thailand was ranked above Malaysia because it was found that the Thai government and private sector play a greater role in supporting the arts and crafts by providing funding, research and development to enhance craftsmanship (BFM 89.9, 2010).

Several initiatives have taken a global perspective on the growing number and increasing maturity of design policies and promotion programmes, such as the See Project. Their

design policy and promotion map present statements from design practitioners from several countries around the world, providing an overview of the current developments in each country and outlining how design fits into government strategies for fostering innovation (Sharing Experience Europe, online). Design Exchange (DX) by the Canadian Design Policy Initiative (<http://www.dx.org>) provides resources and information on worldwide design policies, indexing design policy, research, listings and a directory. Initial data collected by senior researcher Gisele Raulik-Murphy (in 2008 – see Appendix 4) at Cardiff's Metropolitan University studying national design policies and the structure of design organizations indicate that there is no specific design policy in Malaysia.

Design policies elsewhere are commonly linked and managed by the country's design council. As stated above, Malaysia Design Council (MRM) lacks authority. It coordinates design activities in order to enhance the competitiveness of Malaysian products in the local and international markets, and to promote good design generally. The Malaysian Good Design Mark (MGDM) award, initiated by MRM, is stated as the highest design recognition from the Malaysian government through MRM, which endorses products that bear quality in design manufacturing. However, it was found that response from design companies and product manufacturers to this annual award competition is poor. Without having any formal policies to be implemented in a particular area or all areas of design, MRM's role is limited as it is still very much focused on product design. By contrast, the (British) Design Council, established as the Council of Industrial Design in 1944 to promote and improve British products, then focused on product design for the Festival of Britain in the 1950s, has since evolved to enable and inspire the use of design through providing online knowledge and resources, initiate projects which involve design

thinking in business and education, and developed initiatives that support the UK economy. In conjunction, the first creative industries mapping document was published in 1998 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on behalf of the United Kingdom (UK) government to raise awareness of the industries and their contribution to the economy, as well as the issues they face. According to DCMS (2001), the Creative Industries Task Force has investigated issues which impact the creative industries and has made recommendations which have resulted in careers guidance, financial aid for creative businesses, guidance on intellectual property for creators and a range of support for creative exporters. In 2001 the Mapping Document, based on the 1998 document, was published to ensure that the creative industries can achieve full potential building upon UK's reputation for creativity, drawing both historical base and contemporary developments. Initiatives include the £40 million funds allocated for the Creative Partnership to integrate schools, arts and other creative organizations, the launching of Your Creative Future careers guidance booklet on the creative industries, accessibility to museums and galleries, and Culture Online (DCMS, 2001). This document has also included more areas of design-related fields in the creative industries sector, and recognizes the economic relationships with other sectors such as tourism, hospitality, museums, galleries, heritage and sport.

According to Davies (2012), the current challenge faced in Malaysia's design industry is that most manufacturing is OEM (original equipment manufacturer) based, where products are manufactured for others to repackage and sell; hence there is a lack of development in terms of branding and packaging design, as well as poor marketing campaigns. Malaysia's design companies and manufacturers generally are not willing to invest in research and development, but are only interested in quick profits (BFM 89.9,

2010). Also, there is a lack of awareness of the importance of design, originality of design and intellectual property rights (IPR), such as copyrights, trademarks, patents and industrial design rights. It is not unusual that clients do not respect design and designers, asking designers to imitate existing designs or products for a lesser fee. There is little room for innovation and this discourages designers from creatively developing new ideas. This aspect makes design practitioners lose faith in the design discipline and their sense of pride in their work. Current design associations also provide little guidance to designers on how to address local needs and aspirations. An examination of the development periods of Korea's Design Policy (1960–1970, 1980–1990 and 2000 to the present) (see Figure 4.10) shows that their development has progressed from building the industrial foundation such as export-oriented products and packaging towards the development of multinational collaborations, staging Korea's design image and national image at international level.



Period	Development	Details
1960–1970	<b>Built up the industrial foundation</b> Light industry promotion (emphasis on production)	<b>Diffuse need for design</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up design promotion agency (KIDP)</li> <li>• Supported design research for export products</li> <li>• Started to host design exhibitions</li> <li>• Joined the global design organizations (ICSID, ICOGRADA)</li> </ul>
1980–1990	<b>Major industry promotion</b> Heavy and chemical industry promotion (emphasis on technology)	<b>Constructed design industry</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certificate of good design (Good Design Mark)</li> <li>• Design policy division in Economy Ministry</li> <li>• Supported design development budget to small &amp; medium businesses</li> <li>• Supported design development by foreign designers</li> <li>• Government reward programme</li> <li>• Built design portal site (www.designdb.com)</li> <li>• Brought up global designers</li> </ul>
2000–present	<b>High-tech industry promotion</b> IT Industry promotion (emphasis on emotion)	<b>Globalized design industry</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hosted international design events</li> <li>• Expanded design infra (KDC, RDC)</li> <li>• Research for fundamental technology</li> <li>• Improved the university design curriculum</li> <li>• Supported design firms entering global market</li> <li>• Investment in design by local government</li> </ul>

**Table 4.10.** Design policy in the past and present, presented by Choi Wondo, executive managing director of Korean Institute of Design Promotion (Wondo, 2012).

The research reveals that special consideration is needed for restructuring the current system linking the various key design establishments in the Malaysian design scene based upon a national strategic plan. Strategies have been adopted by other countries and design councils elsewhere, such as the Korean Design Council – which implements all-encompassing design policies that cover all areas of design (Korea Institute of Design Promotion, 2009) – while Beijing Industrial Design Promotion Organization limits government involvement to industrial design in order to stimulate trade and encourage competitiveness (Design Exchange (DX), online). South Korea, for example, has set up its design infrastructure so that a single design centre, along with a few regional design centres and multiple design innovation centres to support and work collaboratively with

the main centre, disseminates information and design promotions for different areas of design. The main centre is located in Seoul, the capital of South Korea; 76% of design firms are based in and around Seoul (Korea Institute of Design Promotion, 2009). Besides Korea, European nations and the United Kingdom, emerging economic powers such as China, India, Taiwan and Singapore have recognized design as essential for nation building. This is evident in the Dsg-II, a strategic blueprint of the DesignSingapore's initiatives, the Design for Innovation document published in December 2011 by the UK Design Council to coincide with the Government's Innovation and Research Strategy for Growth, and the SEE Report 2011 which monitors the initiatives and policies undertaken by governments across Europe and around the world which are looking for new drivers of innovation to enhance national and regional economic, sustainable and social development.

Governments have increasing interest, and are placing investment, in design. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a national strategic body that can develop visions and strategies for design. A panel of experts and specialists from all areas of the design disciplines should be selected to comprehensively establish design policies and examine the validity of design divisions/subsidiaries in different ministries to resolve and realign goals and, also, produce a strategic framework for the national design policy.

Malaysia Design Council (MRM) should be established as the authoritative body for all design disciplines because of its existing designation as the 'design council' and its ties with the government. This establishment must be of a high level, able to manage and implement design policies necessary for contributing to the creative economy, the design culture and design education. In conjunction with the implementation of national design

policies, it must also function as a strategic body to oversee the development of Malaysia's brand, clearly communicating relevant messages to the target constituents and stakeholders in multiple countries (Radzi, 2009). MRM can provide leadership to assist in the enhancement of Malaysia's national image in the international community by implementing systematic and comprehensive strategies, such as the influence of the nation brand on its corporations and national products. An example is the establishment in South Korea of the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB) in 2009 to raise global awareness of the Korean brand. According to PCNB (online), the establishment is dedicated to promoting South Korea's image as a country that contributes to international society, produces world-class products and services, and a country that respects other cultures. The Advanced Technology & Design Korea project organized by PCNB together with the Ministry of Knowledge Economy is aimed at raising South Korea's global stature while nurturing the world's leading luxury brands by identifying and promoting content such as products and brands that incorporate innovative technology and design (PCNB, online).

Thus, the authority of MRM must be raised while increasing 'specialist manpower' from different design specializations, and also guiding design practitioners and other stakeholders to understand the essence of Malaysia's nation brand. MRM can introduce new visions or policies which avoid 'copying' or the 'me-tooism' phenomenon, where designers tend to imitate Western or European, or even Japanese, design styles and approaches. Instead, they should foster the mindset of the industry towards innovation and the embracing of local cultural identity with a view towards building a national visual identity that contributes to the nation brand. Such initiatives have been set up elsewhere since the establishment of the Royal College of Art (London) in 1837, and later in post-

war Japan to improve the quality of design products competing with foreign goods. The Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry established the Good Design Selection system in 1957 to prevent low-quality copies of foreign design (Good Design Award, online). In 1970 the Bureau of Science, Technology and Innovation policy set out design strategies for the future of Japan; design industries were asked to align their design with the concept of being ‘small, simple, high in mobility, compact and with intensive technology’. The design policy was also part of the national development policy to help tackle the oil crisis, overpopulation and the lack of living space in Japan (Dickson, 2006). These Japanese-designed products can still be seen and recognized as products of Japan today. Quality products can, in return, create a demand for exports and tourism, and hence, the creative economy. The Malaysian government should consider its support and a new budget should be allocated for funding design research and innovation.

To compete in the international market, MRM must ensure that the value of the Malaysian Good Design Mark (MGDM) is on a par with international design awards such as the Design Mark (a quality standards framework developed jointly by the Design & Technology Association and the Design Council UK), G Mark (Japan’s Good Design Award) or the Red Dot design award, an international product design prize awarded by the Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen in Essen, Germany. It is also recommended that the Malaysia Design Council publicize the success of the award recipients. Recognition of the award must be more widespread to further enhance participation. This will lead to an increase in local products being promoted internationally and will promote the use of design as a commodity (exporting design in the global market) which is able to increase Malaysia’s standing on the international design scoreboard.

MRM can play a role in fostering art and design education as well as new curriculum development in early childhood education, primary and secondary schools, with its networks with the Ministry of Education. As highlighted by Wondo (2012), in order to foster design talents through early design education, initiatives that the Korean Institute of Design Promotion (KIDP) has carried out since 2004 are exemplary. MRM can also stimulate closer links between the design industry and educational institutions to produce graduates who are fit for the industry, catering to the industry's needs, increasing design excellence, capabilities and standards. Such initiative can 'bridge the link' between education and the design industry which is much needed, as expressed by the industry professionals (in Chapter 4.1.5). The Malaysian design industry can give support by providing work placement for student interns. Academia-industry collaborative projects can also be implemented in design modules within the course of a design programme as they can harness the necessary knowledge and skills of future designers, as well as increase the level of competence among student designers. Michael Goh, president of wREGA, said that it is important that students recognize the aspects that clients or consumers look for in a product or a brand (The Star, 2012). Like internships or industry placements, collaborative projects offer students the opportunity to experience the actual demands of a career in design, applying theories, knowledge and skills in actual work settings. The design process allows students to consider various design issues and propose design solutions that are on par with industry standards and quality. Such experience can enhance the students' learning experience, allowing them to apply both theory and practice in professional work (Gan and Liaw, 2012). Besides collaborative projects, industry professionals could also play a role in supporting the educational institutions through seminars, open studios and workshops in order to improve the level of competence and the quality of fresh graduates.

As the graphic design discipline is not fully recognized as a professional field equivalent to the likes of architects, lawyers or accountants and is generally perceived as a low-salary profession of lesser status than science-related disciplines, design practitioners and associations can play a part in raising the standards of the profession by promoting design to the general public through exhibitions, design showcases or design bazaars. With increased attention to the importance of design in Malaysia, the perception and viewpoints of the general public can almost certainly be altered.

In evaluation, it is worth pointing out that when examining national government frameworks such as this, we have to recognize that the government has existing policies and agendas of their own, such as the allocation of budgets and grants. There are those who consider and will argue that some of these policies are counter-productive, such as the special privileges granted to the Malays in the constitution, suggesting this discourages fair competition. As a comparison, in Singapore, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts set up the DesignSingapore Council as the national agency for the promotion and development of Singapore design in 2003 (DesignSingapore, online). This council has a clear structure, which has been set up in line with the system of an authoritarian government. It is a high-level council involving leaders and individuals from the various industry stakeholders, the design community and government. It serves as a common platform to steer the national design agenda and to coordinate the implementation of the initiative. The council works closely with other government agencies, the design community, industry and educational institutions to promote design in business and education, and to develop Singapore as one of the leading international centres for design creativity. The council has one main aim, which is to chart and spearhead the national design direction in order to place Singapore on the

world map for design creativity (DesignSingapore, online). The structure fits with the government's vision and also in terms of the way the nation's identity is portrayed.

It is also worth pointing out that on my research field trip I found that Singapore possesses a comprehensive archive of its nation's visual history and culture, which is very much shared with Malaysia because Singapore was part of Malaysia until 1965. There has been worthy news that the Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, has acquired valuable archival materials due to the lack of foresight and leadership of the National Archives of Malaysia (The Star, 2010). Such an example provides evidence that, compared to Singapore, Malaysia has not valued archival materials even though they are invaluable to a country's history. Ezrena Marwan (2010) claims that many graphic design products and artefacts have not been preserved in archives or collections in Malaysia. In addition to the complexities of our historical past, this adds the difficult task of unfolding the historical details of our (graphic) design history.

I would recommend that the Malaysia Design Council begin with what is clearly lacking, which is the compilation of significant national statistics on the initial data or background information of the Malaysian design industry – its processes, production capabilities, listings of organizations, creative agencies and directory of designers. For successful economic development, research should be undertaken to produce a design census that identifies:

1. Investments made in design by both corporations and governments for at least the last five years.
2. The turnover or revenues of the design industry.

3. The number of designers, design graduates and design firms.
4. The type of design companies by design discipline and size (number of employees).

With a clear listing of figures and information on the design industry, a well-planned 'design infrastructure' can be developed, one that can indicate the revenues from design that contribute to the economy or the gross domestic product (GDP) growth of Malaysia.

The next step is for the Malaysia Design Council to establish several significant features, which are commonly adopted by other design councils:

1. Establish awards to encourage greater competitiveness among designers and publicize the local and national design talents who have been awarded the Malaysian Good Design Mark (MGDM).
2. Make industry advice and consultancy services available to further encourage local small and medium-sized enterprises on matters relating to design, product design and branding.
3. Foster art and design at various educational levels. It can also bridge the gap between educational institutions (private and government) and the design industry.



4. Create National Design Archives specializing in collecting and documenting design artefacts in all areas of design, which will provide a rich and valuable source of design knowledge on the country's visual history, heritage, identity and culture (which I found substantially lacking).
5. Function as the highest-level advisory body for design, to advise all ministries on all design-related agendas within the government, including: design education, design culture, tourism and nation branding. It can also act as the intermediary between the government ministries and other design organizations, associations and design enablers.

The research undertaken has highlighted some of the weaknesses within the realm of the creative industry and graphic design practice which affect the initiative of shaping a nation's identity and the building of Malaysia's nation brand. These recommendations are also aimed at improving the current state of design practice in the Malaysian context.

### 4.3 Developing a Malaysian Visual Identity Guide

#### 4.3.1 Construing a national visual identity and a nation's brand

The research undertaken indicates the complexities involved in identifying Malaysian national identity and visual identity. The lack of guidance for design practitioners on the strategic definitions and creative solutions for a national visual identity further prompts the development of *A Nation's Visual Language* and a *Visual Identity Guide* for Malaysia.

The books are the result of several projects undertaken through engagement with varied groups of people. The process of reflective practice consequently contributed to the design outcomes of the guidebooks.

Countries throughout the world compete to attract the attention of tourists, potential investors and foreign trade partners. Having a distinct image will enhance the growth of a country both internally and externally, and will generate revenue for the economy, as well as being beneficial politically. A nation with a strong nation brand will have a key global competitive advantage over other nations. It is also important as a source of economic value and differentiation (Koniszcer, 2012).

As Ahmad (2010) explained in the interview, initiatives to represent Malaysia externally through a strong visual identity are scarce, and have not been consistent except for tourism campaigns. As seen in the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board's 'Malaysia Truly Asia' campaign material launched in 1999, posters like the one illustrated in Figure 4.27 represent Malaysia's national characteristics in a selective and clichéd manner. Prominent in the background are government-led architectural mega-projects such as Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre and KL Tower, which are all features of the

capital city, which is the point of arrival for most Western tourists. The ethnic diversity of the country is represented to the right of the poster by a group of women, each wearing some form of traditional ethnic costume that they seldom wear in everyday life, and the Malay woman is not wearing the *tudung* (headscarf) that has been adopted by Muslim girls and women in Malaysia, and is part of a standard dress code in government offices, public schools and universities, and formal occasions. It can also be seen as very widely adopted as part of a conservative Islamic reaction to world events triggered by the 9/11 attacks of 2001. To the left of the picture another group of women is shown in the kind of costumes only worn at traditional weddings or festivals that involve traditional dance, and behind them are seen the jungles and beaches to which tourists are likely to go after their arrival in Kuala Lumpur. The one boy in the picture is also dressed in the manner of a theatrical or cinematic Malay. The videos in this campaign also feature a similar cast of attractive people in a variety of traditional costumes dancing together in a what appears to be a single unified event, rather than the series of separate events organized by the various ethnic communities, and everyone dances to the soundtrack of a traditional Malay song. The campaign then appears to create an impression of unity and harmony that is not based in the reality of everyday Malaysian life. Although the architecture and landscape are shared by all, and the government does support an extensive programme of national holidays that provides opportunities for each community to celebrate its religious festivals, the details of the landscape and daily life are combined into what appears to a single national event that cannot be found at any one time or place in Malaysia. This kind of clichéd view is even found in the destination publicity created by the European expatriate community, as seen in the magazine spread for the *KL Welcome Guide*, in Figure 4.28. The layout combines stock photographs to give the impression that the experience of Kuala Lumpur comprises colourful traditional dancing ceremonies, high-tech architecture, bargain street markets and exotic cuisine.



**Figure 4.27.** Malaysia Truly Asia campaign poster, c. 1999



**Figure 4.28.** Magazine spread – Alive in Culture. *KL Welcome Guide* 2008.

Koniszcer (2012) argues that one of the key advantages of nation branding is that it can help to overcome this kind of unrealistic stereotyping. He argues that the purpose of a nation brand is not limited to promoting a country as a tourist destination, but to contribute to a univocal identity in the global marketplace to communicate with authorities or economic bodies, attract talent and investment, and promote national brands, products or services for export markets. Ahmad (2010) also comments that

although there have been several internal national campaigns emphasizing ethnic harmony and national unity in Malaysia, a successful nation brand can also initiate or generate a consensus throughout the nation regarding the country brand and stimulate internal improvements. The tourism campaigns show that Malaysia is portrayed as a nation with a colourful and diverse culture. This aspect is recognized as a strong point for Malaysia. However, Malaysia's strength in the global economy is uncertain. For example, do 'Made in Malaysia' products or brands have a country of origin effect? Therefore the challenge for Malaysia (and other nations) is to find a distinctive way of promoting its strengths and identity to show 'who we are' and 'what we can do' while retaining its unique values and diversity in relation to the rest of the world.

As discussed in the Introduction, nation branding focuses on what makes one country distinct from others. For a nation branding campaign to be effective, it must succeed in forming an internal consensus that can then be promoted to other nations in the hope of developing an international consensus. The consensus cannot be built simply on opinion since key facts, such as the nation's economic performance, its social and physical infrastructure, create the underlying narrative upon which the nation brand has to be built. The nation brand then has to develop a positive and competitive identity that offers economic, experiential and emotional value for each target audience, as well as the development of a holistic and comprehensive brand for export promotions, economic development, tourism, foreign direct investments and other key ongoing national initiatives (Radzi, 2009). So although the nation brand may generate a simple, encompassing and integral idea, the idea is one built through recognizing the complexities of a nation's identity in a way that forcefully communicates the value of the brand.

Aldersey-Williams (1992) suggests that design has potential as a national identifier and design which has recognizable national characteristics appears more interesting and authentic. As discussed in Chapter 2.3, nations like Germany and France have traded successfully on such perceptions of the qualities of their manufactured products, while nations like the United Kingdom have marketed their financial services by appealing to the reputation of the British as champions of universal rights, tolerance and free trade (however justified that reputation might be). Each of these nations then focuses on some positive aspect of their culture, traditions and history in order to enhance the perceived values of their export products and services. Therefore, designers working on the branding of less-established nations need also to consider the cultural values and traditions that are truly evident in the everyday life of their country as their primary sources of inspiration. Because graphic designers are not sociologists or historians, they then need some form of research process to find inspiration from authentic and credible sources. The first stages of the investigation I have made into local designers' perceptions of the characteristics of their nation used methods mostly drawn from current design research thinking and the social sciences. The results produced insights into the way that designers in Malaysia think and work, but the insights do not provide processes that can assist designers in their daily work on branding projects. Therefore, I decided in the final stages of my research to concentrate upon devising and investigating tools that Malaysian graphic designers might be able to use to identify valuable and productive sources that could be useful as a reference tool to assist them in working on local graphic design projects since graphic designers are familiar with working to rules set in 'style manuals' often created by more senior designers. The task of creating a handbook is a collaborative one, and the handbook needs to remain open-ended for future development. Therefore the idea of creating a nation's visual language handbook and a national visual identity guide appeared to be not only a valuable design tool for

designers working on tight deadlines, but also a useful investigative tool that would allow other designers to develop and improve my own preliminary investigations, and indeed, to develop the investigation beyond the lifetime of my own PhD research.

#### **4.3.2 ‘A Nation’s Visual Language’ design project**

*A Nation’s Visual Language* book was developed through several design projects and tests focused on construing a national visual identity involving various participants. The design projects were used as a method to enhance further understanding, and to support the knowledge gained from literature and prior research methods. The projects included:

1. Collaborative project with Malaysia Design Archive (MDA)
2. ‘Malaysian traits’ photography project
3. Design tests

The field research involved the gathering of visual content through primary and secondary research materials; consistently documenting research findings through an iterative process; and collaborative projects with Malaysia Design Archive (MDA) and photographers sharing common goals. The iterative process included exploring the visual language of a nation to construe a national visual identity. Consideration was given to the structure, content and employment of images in an attempt to reflect local perspectives as well as the colourful photography of people, diversities, landscape, and architecture which are highlights of the book. The handbook has three main parts:

1. History and culture
2. History of visual culture in Malaysia
3. Malaysia in the era of globalization

Figure 4.29 shows the contents of the book:

	<h1>Contents</h1>	
	Introduction	1
	<b>Part 1: History and Culture</b>	3
	Topographical Maps	7
	Pathways	21
	<b>Part 2: History of Visual Culture in Malaysia</b>	33
	World Heritage Site	37
	Vernacular Typography	
	<b>Malaysia Design Archive (MDA)</b>	43
	Artefacts	
	Colour palette	
	Icons	
	Type	
	Language	
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**Figure 4.29.** Contents page of *A Nation's Visual Language*

Writing, designing and gaining feedback/recommendations through tests to shape the concept and content of the book involved multiple iterations. As discussed in Chapter 3, this idea of reflective process is taken from Schön (1983). This handbook was then conceived as a project to learn more about developing nation brands through the kind of 'double-loop' learning process (Schön, 1983), where the eventual product is at any stage a work in progress that may be further developed by the subsequent actions of users.



Drafts of the book were iteratively developed through design tests with graphic design students and working designers (described in Chapter 4.3.3 and 4.3.4) to gain feedback and the informed sharing of creative perspectives from the participants.

*A Nation's Visual Language* seeks to visualize Malaysian culture, which is far more diverse than is commonly perceived. It brings the reader on a colourful graphic and pictorial journey to explore the history and origins of the nation, and the religious customs and practices of various groups of people. From the ancient civilizations of India and China, to the era of colonialism, the mapping and deconstruction of state maps, colours and symbols of the past highlight that Malaysian culture is the legacy of many different ancestral groups. Customs and beliefs passed down from the early kingdoms of Srivijaya and Majapahit to the historical Malacca Sultanate where Hindu, Islamic and Christian cultures all thrived in a cosmopolitan commercial centre. Icons of tangible and intangible national heritage (National Heritage Department, 2005) are represented as markers of national identity, while the traits of Malaysian culture serve as a visual guide indicating the country's cultural diversity.

Part One explores Malaysia's history and culture. As a nation state Malaysia is less than sixty years old, but remains and artefacts from ancient times have been found within its present borders; human remains, pottery and stone tools date back to the prehistoric era; iron and bronze artefacts link Malaysia to the famous Bronze Age culture in Southeast Asia, known as Dongsun. The Srivijaya maritime kingdom of the 7th–12th centuries had close links with China and India and was the centre of Buddhist learning. Its strategic position on the ancient trade route between China and the Middle East attracted traders and immigrants. Later, immigrants from Egypt, Persia and China

settled in Malaysia. In the 1400s, the Malacca Sultanate was a major entrepôt centre for traders. Many of the merchants who came as spice traders settled down and married local women. Later, the colonial influence of the Portuguese, Dutch and British each brought an influx of people to Malaya.

The topographical maps represent Malaysia over time as well as space. They provide a graphic impression of locations, indicating how the seas and coasts of the region have been perceived, i.e., from the early kingdom of Langkasuka in the 2nd–14th centuries, Pan Pan in the 3rd–5th centuries, the Srivijaya Empire in the 7th–13th centuries, the Majapahit Empire from 1293 to 1527, the Malacca Sultanate from 1402 to 1511, Portuguese Malacca from 1511 to 1641, Dutch Malacca from 1641 to 1824, the Straits Settlements from 1826 to 1946, the Federated Malay States from 1895 to 1946, and the Unfederated Malay States from 1909 to 1946 until the independence of Malaya in 1957 (Figure 4.30). Maps in the ‘Pathways’ section illustrated significant points in history: the early settlements, the spread of Islam, spice routes, major trade routes, European power and the Japanese Occupation. This shows that engagement with international trade and diversity has always been rooted in Malaysia’s history. Today the nation state is made up of a very cosmopolitan society that has been part of a world-wide network for many centuries. The changing national borders on these maps also serve to show how the notion of Malaysian culture cannot be limited solely to the territory enclosed by the country’s present national boundaries. In particular, parts of what are now Indonesia and Thailand have cultures and language very similar to present-day Malaysia.



**Figure 4.30.** Topographical maps – p.6–7 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

Part Two contributes to the visual narrative of Malaysia's past, responding to the fact that only a limited amount of material about the history of Malaysia's visual culture has been recorded and published. The artistic and cultural heritage of Malaysia is diverse, having been under foreign influence for over 440 years; it began with Portuguese rule in 1511 and ended with the British in 1957 in peninsular Malaysia. The gateway of the Portuguese A'Famosa fort in Malacca (as seen in Chapter 2, Figure 2.10) had a Dutch coat-of-arms carved in relief, signifying Western-type colonial graphic design (Kamil Yunus, 2007). As a result of former European colonial power, Western influence is still prevalent today as many Malaysians were English educated. The earliest forms of graphic design are said to have appeared through the convergence of East and West such as Islamic texts brought by Arab merchants, the printing press and papers brought by the Chinese, and Indian ornamental textiles (Kamil Yunus, 2007). Hence the images shown in Part Two of the handbook serve to illustrate all these differences in a way that can be easily understood by users who may be unfamiliar with all this history, but can sense its impact through observing the diversity of artistic styles

evident in the images.

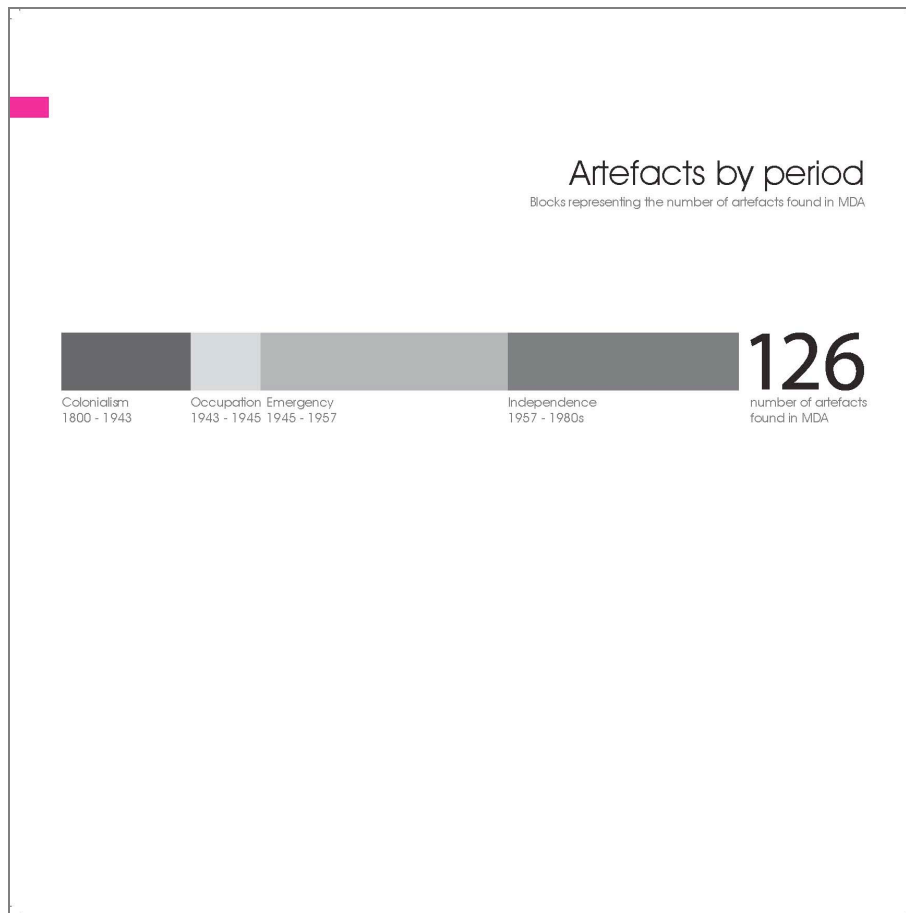
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)) states that tangible heritage includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artefacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture. In 2003 UNESCO's cultural department defined intangible cultural heritage as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, online). This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly re-created by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

The handbook seeks to address these intangible features of cultural heritage by highlighting examples such as traditional trades and customs, colonial buildings and shophouses. These examples help to show how the present mercantile culture of Malaysia derived from the era of trading between East and West in the Malacca Strait from about 500 years ago in Malacca. In 2008 Malacca and Georgetown, Penang were listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Efforts are therefore being taken to preserve the multicultural, historical architecture and significant buildings in these cities. Malacca's government buildings, churches, squares and fortifications demonstrate that the early stages of Malaysia's modern history originate in the 15th-

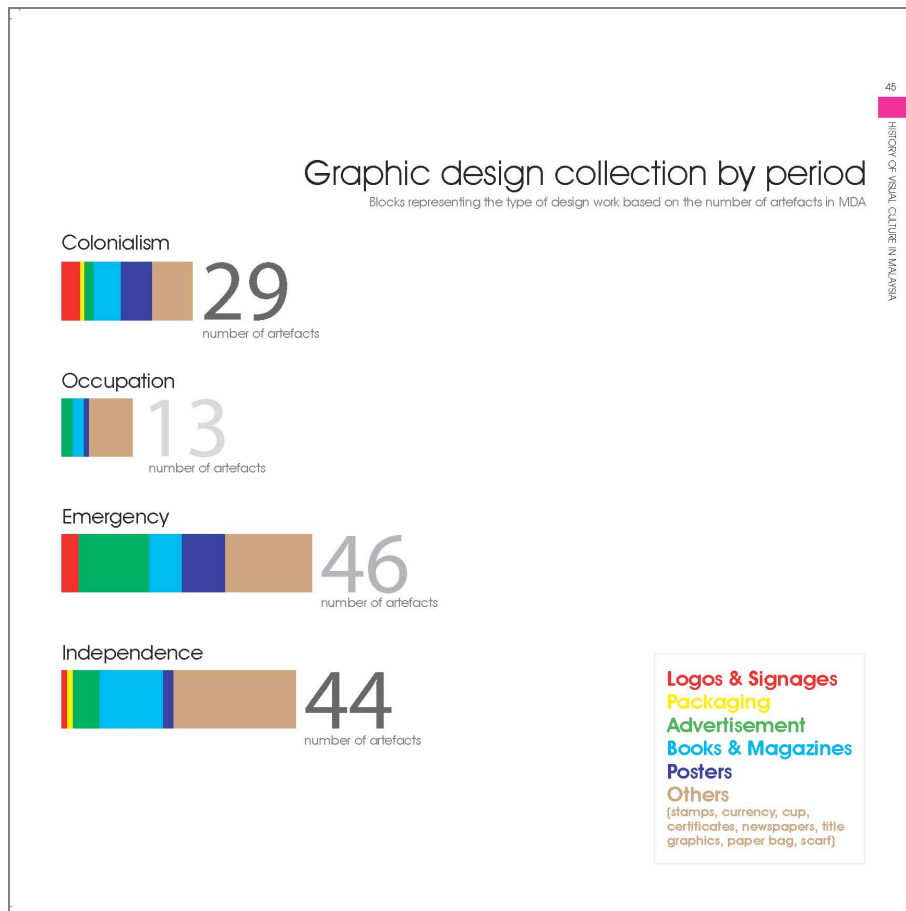
century Malay sultanate and with the Portuguese and Dutch periods beginning in the early 16th century. As a city featuring residential and commercial buildings, Georgetown represents the British era from the end of the 18th century. These two cities constitute a unique architectural and cultural townscape without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2008), and so their inclusion in the handbook helps to inform users about some of Malaysia's unique selling points (USP). Focusing on this mercantile heritage also fits well with the current Malaysian government policy of re-establishing the country as a major trading hub, much as has been done in Singapore since its secession from the Malaysian Federation in 1965.

A collaborative project was carried out with Ezrena Marwan, founder of Malaysia Design Archive (MDA), to deconstruct graphic design artefacts from MDA archive. Initiated in 2008, MDA is a website ([www.malaysiadesignarchive.org](http://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org)) of graphic design works from 1800 to just after Merdeka (Independence) aimed at mapping the development of graphic design in Malaysian history. The limitations of using the MDA website as a database are due to the very small size of its collection. However, it can be argued that the methods used in deconstructing the artefacts show how future users can analyse this material in a systematic way, analysing trends in the use of colour, type and symbols. This kind of analytical survey is a lesson the handbook can then pass on to users, inviting further development and refinement. The content of MDA is limited because it is a young archive, but this again reflects the current profile of the design industry in Malaysia, where the understanding of art and culture is gradually enhanced through different initiatives in the Malaysian design industry.

The number of artefacts by period is shown in Figure 4.31, while the type of design work by period is shown in Figure 4.32:



**Figure 4.31.** MDA: Artefacts by period – p.44 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.



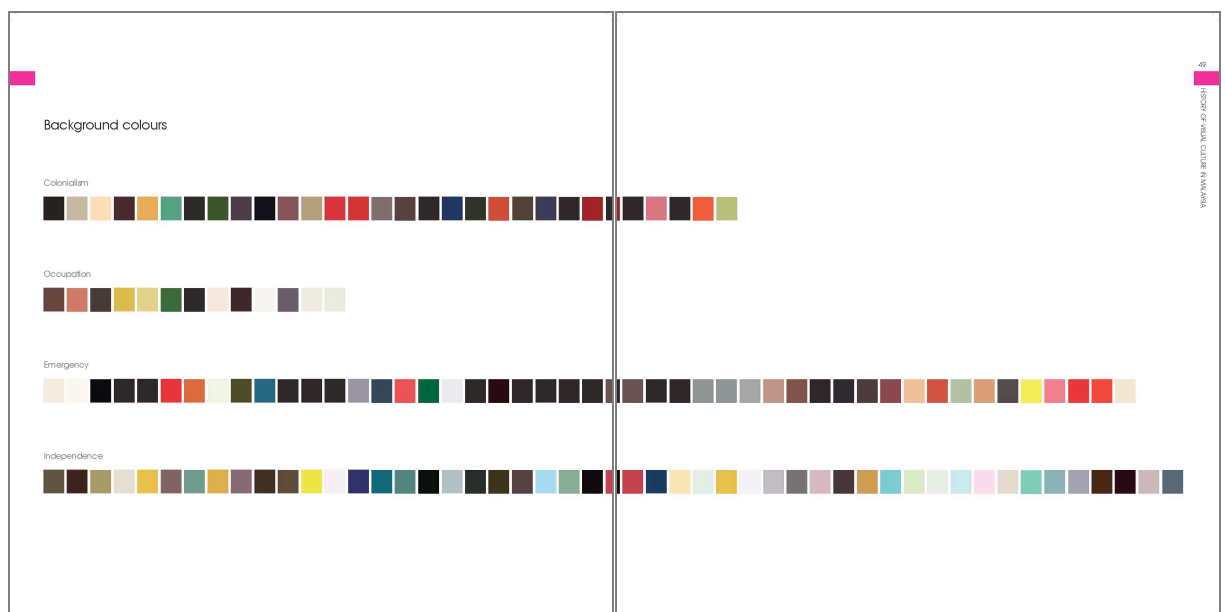
**Figure 4.32.** MDA: Graphic design collection by period – p.45 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

A more varied colour palette is displayed in the independence period where a mixture of bold and muted colours was used (Figures 4.33, 4.34 and 4.35 which depict the foreground, background and accent colours used during the Colonial Period, Occupation, Emergency and Independence). This reflects a period when new industrial colours became available and a nationalist sentiment became evident in Malayan graphic design. Ezrena Marwan (in Birdwatching, 2012) argues that at this time a diversity of styles merged as a process of filtration where colonial imagery and symbolism were deleted from all communication media. Also, more communication media – such as posters, photography and book covers – were used, depicting people in traditional costumes, in contrast to the British colonial period when posters were populated with

imagery of women in traditional costumes welcoming outsiders, with scenic backgrounds. The advancement of technology during the 1950s and 1960s also contributed towards a more extensive colour palette, in contrast to the predominant use of black and white during the pre-independence period (Figure 4.36).

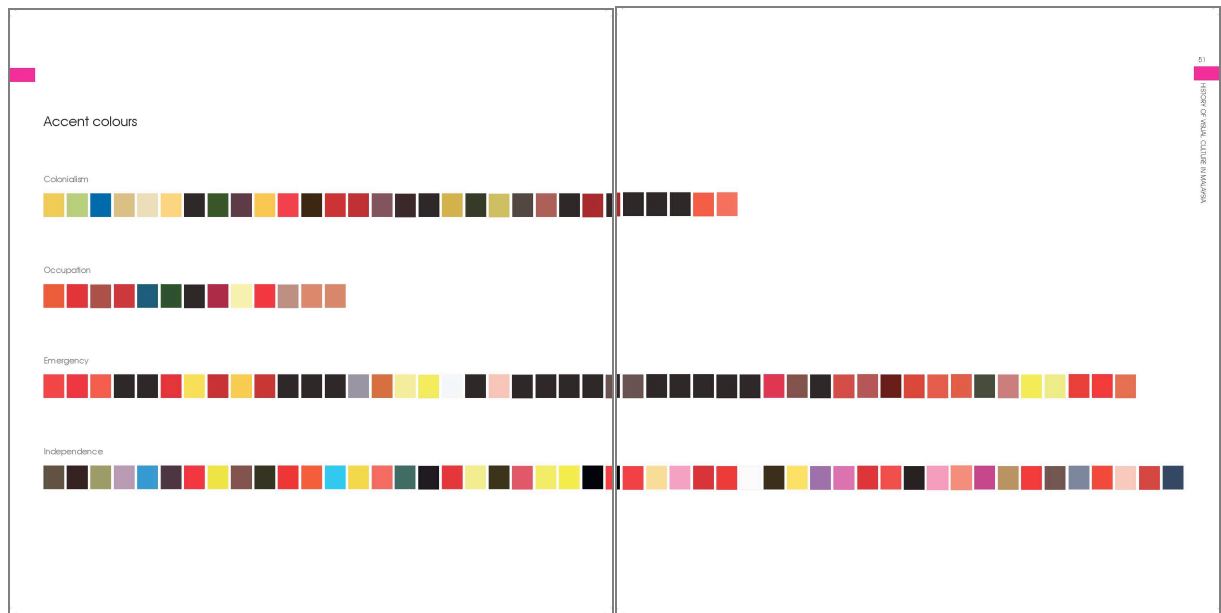


**Figure 4.33.** Colour palette by period: Foreground colours – p.46–47 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.



**Figure 4.34.** MDA: Colour palette by period: Background colours – p.48–49 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.



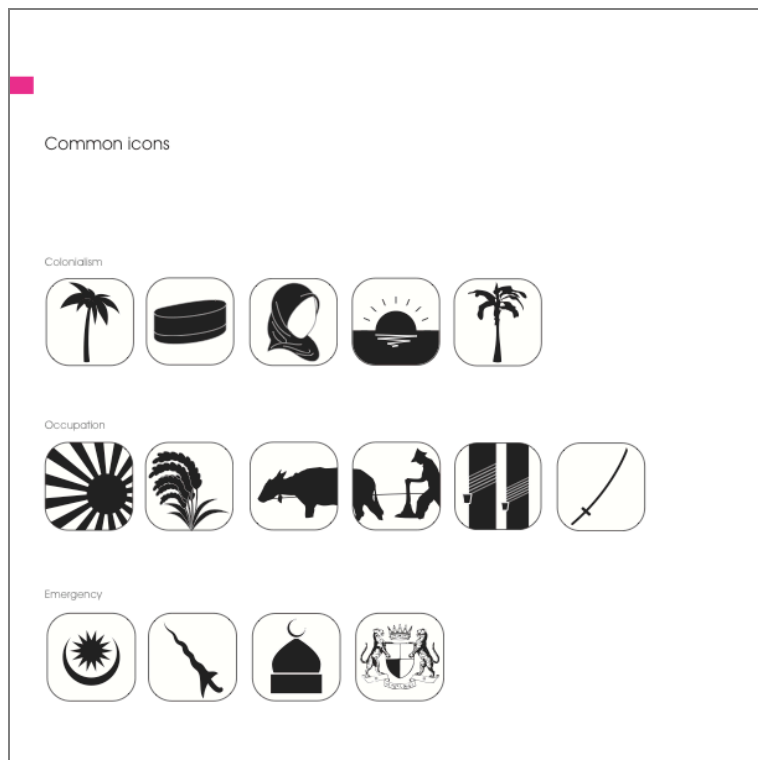


**Figure 4.35.** Colour palette by period: Accent colours – p.50–51 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.



**Figure 4.36.** Black and white or sepia: Pre-1957 and Post-1957 – p.53 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

Visual artefacts in different periods (colonial period, occupation, emergency and independence) are analysed. Icons, symbols, common objects, visual imagery and style are identified. Some are commonly found in a particular period (Figure 4.37). For example, in the colonial period, visual imagery depicting coconut trees and landscapes were common; the local people were often depicted wearing the *songkok* (cap worn by Malay Muslims) and headscarf (Figure 4.38). The visual form and style favour a flat use of colour and a two-dimensional use of space. During the occupation period, the Japanese symbol of the ‘rising sun’ was used repetitively, as well as agricultural symbolism such as visuals of people wearing farmers’ hats, people working in paddy fields, imagery of buffalos and of Japanese swords (Figures 4.39 and 4.40). Comparatively, there were fewer depictions of coconut trees in the occupation period, while details of buildings, such as decorative and ornamental elements, started to appear. In the emergency period, there were many Western product advertisements and packaging designs such as those of Hercules, Maclean, Kepler and Stilman (Figure 4.41).



**Figure 4.37.** Icons by period: Common icons – p.54 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.





**Figure 4.40.** 'Rebirth' stamp series (8 cent and 15 cent), dated 1944.



**Figure 4.41.** 'Indigestion Pain? Stop it now!' advertisement for Maclean stomach powder, dated 1955 published in *Straits Times* newspaper.

The arrival of the British in the 19th century brought an influx of printed materials, influencing the development of visual culture in Malaya. This period also saw the

emergence of modern graphic design. Ezrena Marwan (2010) claims that the plethora of printed information which emerged was a result of the eagerness of British colonizers to boast about their vanguard industrial position. With their increased intervention in the country, the British used graphic design as a marketing tool. One of the many ways they used to engage with local markets was the use of multiple languages and scripts and local symbols (Ezrena Marwan, 2010). An example is the 1902 Simit logo (Figure 4.42) which incorporated a set of scales emphasizing its trading activities as well as Chinese script because, at the time, the Chinese community dominated the local market. Simit, then a small British company trading tin and rubber, was the forerunner of Sime Darby, now a very large company.



**Figure 4.42.** Simit logo, 1902.

Local cultural elements such as the mosque and Chinese lantern also started to appear. Ezrena Marwan (2010) observed that colonists took steps to adapt foreign advertisements to local languages using systems of symbolic exchange, such as images of local women and Jawi script, in order to attract the local market, as in the advertisement



for Tiger beer (Figure 4.43). I view this as a means of early ‘glocalization’ – it indicates the ways in which foreign products such as cars, cosmetics, medicines and consumer goods were being marketed through local adaptations to target the local market.



**Figure 4.43.** Tiger Beer advertisement distributed by Fraser & Neave, 1933.

From independence onwards (Figure 4.44), visual imagery depicting ‘harmony’ and multiracialism was introduced, including a large number of film posters mainly in Chinese and Malay; locally made horror films such as *pontianak* (a type of vampire in local folklore) and *orang minyak* (oily man in Malay ghost myths) in particular. Many Chinese publications were clearly influenced by the visual style, use of type and visual imagery of their motherland (mainland China). There were also publications influenced by British official papers, copying their administration style and visual imagery. Products such as Phillumeny (match-related items) often used packaging design, brand names and

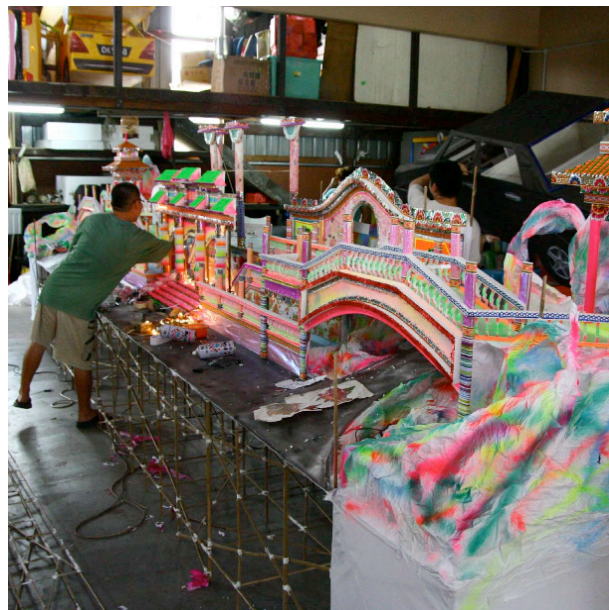
advertisements very much in the English style (and language), while some locally-made products bore a stamp stating ‘made in (particular state or Malaya)’. Nationalistic icons and symbols such as the flag, rising sun, map and emblem appeared as signifiers depicting ‘victory’. Coconut trees still appeared frequently in visual imagery, while agricultural elements were depicted to send messages against poverty and hunger and to boost the home-grown economy of Malaysia as a postcolonial nation.



**Figure 4.44.** Graphic design artefacts from MDA: Independence – p.56–57 of *A Nation’s Visual Language*.

Also important to any historical review of the prevalent graphic culture is a consideration of the traditional arts and crafts, which reflect the many diverse influences and migrations throughout the region’s history. Endangered trades featured in this section (Figures 4.45 and 4.46) reveal the principal external sources that have come through trade, conquest and migration. These include Arabic, Hindu, Indochinese and mainland Chinese, some of which have become part of the traditional and cultural practices of Malaysia’s pluralistic society. This section considers information dating back to the mid-19th century through to the 1910s when Penang was the great land of opportunity for

Chinese craftsmen because China was in political turmoil. Many Chinese migrated to Penang and hence propagated sophisticated crafts and trades that demand precision and present strong artistic values (Virtual Malaysia, 2005). Early settlers from India also carried their own cultural values and skills into the shophouse cities of Malacca and Georgetown which have been listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.



## Endangered Trades

There are diverse crafts and visual arts, which trace back to external influences over the centuries, traditional and cultural practice, and the pluralistic society of Malaysia. Many customs and traditions, working methods and practices are gradually fading due to modernisation. Globalisation influences the change in lifestyle and consumer culture in which descendants of the traders and craftsmen are not willing to inherit the crafts.

It all dates back to the mid 19th century up until the 1910s, when Penang was the great land of opportunity for Chinese craftsmen because China was in political turmoil. Many of the traders migrated here and hence propagated crafts and trades that are sophisticated, and which demands precision, and artistic values (Jau Feb 2005, Last Man Standing, Virtual Malaysia Magazine). Similarly, the early settlers from India also carried forth cultures into the shophouse city of Penang.

Only through the renewed interest of young Malaysians in their heritage, some traditional trades are being documented to preserve the specialist knowledge and traditional ways of working.

**Figure 4.45.** Endangered Trades – p.62–63 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

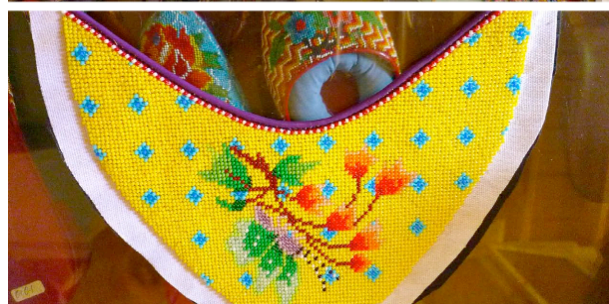


Traders: Tan Kok Oo, 4, Lebuh Armenian, Georgetown, Penang.  
Yeo of Woon Ah Shoemaker, 50 Jalan Telok, Malacca

## Nyonya Beaded Shoes

The Baba-Nyonya people are descendants of the 15th and 16th century Chinese in British Straits Settlements of Malaya who had adopted partially or fully the local customs of the time. Their marriage customs include intricately designed beaded shoes commonly known as kasut manek. The shoes are adorned with popular motifs used as patterns such as flowers, birds, butterflies, and fruits. These motifs were likely to appeal to the femininity of the Nyonya, which had both European and Chinese influences.

The making of a beaded shoe involves an intricate process in which the beads are hand sewn one by one. Today, shoemakers who specialise in beaded shoes are fading away.



**Figure 4.46.** Endangered Trades: Nyonya Beaded Shoes – p.70–71 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.



Many customs and traditions, and working methods and practices, are gradually fading due to modernization. As globalization influences lifestyles and consumer culture, descendents of former traders and craftsmen are less willing to inherit the crafts of previous generations. Renewed interest from young Malaysians who want to know their heritage means that some traditional trades are being documented to preserve this specialist knowledge and other traditional ways of working. For example, *Arts-Ed* ([www.arts-ed-penang.org](http://www.arts-ed-penang.org)) is a community-based heritage education programme that was started in the historic enclave of Georgetown by a group of arts educators to gather this kind of information. However, besides learning the traditional crafting techniques, the survival of local indigenous skills largely depends on the involvement of contemporary designers, who can consider the blending of traditional and contemporary elements. This supports Sasaki's (2010) statement that the successful blend of old and new is the key for cultural sustainability and the creation of new meaning for future generations. In view of developing a successful nation brand, this allows design practitioners to consider ways in which to galvanize local resources and talents to strengthen the nation's cultural assets and connect with the global market.

The section on banknotes consists of analyzing colours and denominations, and icons of tangible national heritage (Figure 4.47). The colours of banknotes were later used as secondary colours of Malaysia's nation brand *Visual Identity Guide*. Malaysian national and state flags were also deconstructed, focusing upon the colours and symbols (Figure 4.48).



**Figure 4.47.** Colour of banknotes by period and year issued: Colour gradients – p.78–79 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.



**Figure 4.48.** Icons of national heritage – p.82–83 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

Part Three reveals the most striking feature of post-independence Malaysia: the government's dual commitment to multiculturalism and the development of a high-tech economy to supplement the traditional agricultural economy. The resulting social transformation can best be seen in the bustling political and business life of Kuala Lumpur city. Malaysia has therefore been demonstrating increasing degrees of

globalization during the past decade (Noorbakhsh, 2006). Colonialism, modernization and globalization have all played pivotal roles in the social transformation of Malaysia. This social transformation has particularly taken place over the last few decades, due in no small part to the fourth prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad's role as an initiator of change. His vision was for the Malaysian capital to become the region's economic, political and cultural hub. An urban sprawl of high-design retail hubs, mega-malls, haute cuisine restaurants, the night scene, five-star hotels and skyscrapers reflect global consumer culture in Malaysia. Within all the modern establishments in the city and its local districts, international products and services are seen intertwined with street fare, night markets, fusion food, local delicacies, local activities, home-grown designer labels, colonial buildings and local complexes. The notion of local culture and the experience of globalization in relation to socio-cultural-political influences in Malaysia is reflected within Malaysia's evolving visual culture.

Part Three also visualizes the diverse demographics of Malaysia, representing the diversity of multiracial, multireligious, multilingual Malaysians of different ethnic groups and identities. It looks at significant things that represent Malaysian identity and culture, some of which are from responses gathered by questionnaire (discussed in Chapter 4.1.4) and from tangible and intangible national heritage sites and icons. Of particular symbolic interest is the visual study on *nasi lemak* (coconut rice), which is widely found in Malaysia and has been called the national dish (Figure 4.49). A small visual study on *nasi lemak* indicates ways in which it is a signifier of Malaysian identity that appears on restaurant menus, in food presentations, on convenience meal packs, and on signs at roadside stalls. The use of photographic imagery, colour, typography and packaging design offer rich and valuable information about the graphic design and visual style of a local product. Visual

narratives are used to depict the urban scene, such as mall culture, the tuition phenomenon, and transportation and mobility, as well as the government administrative city and the touristic qualities of Malaysia.



**Figure 4.49.** A national heritage: The visual study of *nasi lemak* – p.114–115 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

‘Malaysian traits’, anecdotal work of local photographers, also provides fresh insight into what is typical to Malaysian culture, through observing the colourful eccentricities found in everyday Malaysian life. Anecdotal photography proves particularly useful in capturing the intricate intercultural performance that takes place everyday in contemporary Malaysian society, which is more likely to influence the conception of national identity so that diverse groups might become a more equal part of it. Significantly, many of the anecdotal photographs reflect the cultural diversity exemplified in ethnic particularities and the festivals held by different groups of people living in parallel (Figure 4.50). Images of culture in action are more likely to depict what it means to be Malaysian than didactic and clichéd stories preaching superficial harmony (Desai, 2006).



**Figure 4.50.** Malaysian traits: Ethnic peculiarities – p.140–141 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

*A Nation's Visual Language* handbook is aimed at making graphic design practitioners understand that it is important to note that although having only gained independence some fifty years ago, Malaysia's cultural background stretches back thousands of years, having been on a strategic route for early traders and, at various times, been part of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim empires. More recently, as a nation growing within a globalized commercial system, Malaysian culture is now heavily influenced by Western cultural sources (beyond the former colonial influence of Britain), while traditions and local cultures are increasingly becoming intertwined with global culture in a technologically driven society. Consequently, contemporary Malaysian culture, in common with the culture of all those nations affected by the forces of globalization, is increasingly international rather than national in character. The handbook then helps the designer to better recognize those features that are unique to their country, including those that are peculiar in the sense that they are 'glocalized' versions of the international norm. This is particularly evident in the examples of local foods and dining traditions shown in the handbook. A good example is the traditional *kopitiam* (Chinese

coffeeshops) concept (in Part 3), evidencing the notion of glocalization where Malaysia has the potential to keep and renew its own cultural essence.

The presentation of the book reflects the various ways in which art and design can define local culture. Visualizing how history and visual culture can be presented is one of the most immediate methods of articulating what the nation stands for. A useful way to better understand the unique features of a local culture is to map them visually. *A Nation's Visual Language* handbook emerges as a collection of different ways of using visual imagery to define the nation's visual identity. The handbook is therefore offered to other designers in a Schön-like way, as a tool that can be expanded and developed by its users, both through further research and application to actual graphic design projects in an era when traditional and contemporary forms of culture are being shaped in urban environments. In expanding and developing the handbook, designer-users may then start to act on the basis of learning from their first attempts to use it, reflecting on its benefits and limitations as they do so.

As previously discussed in Chapter 4.3.1, multiracial harmony and unity emerge as strong common themes, as do the warm climate and diverse natural resources, which are often seen in Ministry of Tourism campaigns that have been distributed across the world. So while these familiar images of Malaysia may not be inaccurate, overuse of them may lead to clichéd imagery that simplifies Malaysian identity to the world. In response, this practice-led project emphasizes deriving other, often more significant, markers of national identity through analysing icons, symbols, colour and (tangible and intangible) national heritage of Malaysia from different periods, as well as looking at architecture, products,

languages and people, or the cultural diversities which can offer audiences a richer insight into the aspects in which the nation can really be seen to stand apart from others. The most authentic image of a nation's make-up must acknowledge the myriad details (including its people and products) that make a place distinctive. If the handbook can help designers to appreciate how many factors combine to form a national identity, then the sources for creative inspiration are increased, in contrast to the lack of creativity and unoriginal communication found in the more clichéd destination branding materials. The handbook therefore also seeks to stimulate creativity through inspiring designers to identify places or experiences that are unique to their nation and ask how design practitioners can interpret them as meaningful designs, products or services, or perhaps start to redefine the concept of national products or souvenirs in a way more likely to capture the interest of their international audience.

In summary, *A Nation's Visual Language* presents a narrative of the nation's history and visual culture, unique traits and the nature of contemporary Malaysia. Depending on the particular application, policy makers and design practitioners can reflect and draw upon these reference points – history, geography, icons, ethnic motifs. As a visual summary, the accompanying booklet (Section 4.4) serves as a visual identity guide for design practitioners underlining key identifiers for a Malaysian nation brand. The elements can be used consistently, but flexibly, across the different applications of the identity. The various basic elements should be used consistently across different applications reflecting the essence of Malaysia's national visual identity.

### 4.3.3 Design Test I

The first preliminary exercise I developed to test the value of the handbook for designers working on a nation branding project was a design brief titled ‘Distilling the essence,’ which was developed to be carried out by a third-year graphic design cohort consisting of Malaysian and several overseas students (Table 4.11). The students were divided into two groups of ten students, Test group (A) and Control group (B). The participants (students) were asked to bring their own art materials for a workshop. Volunteers (colleagues) were asked to document the process through photography and observation.

Project Title	: Distilling the Essence
Project Duration	: 26 October 2010
Time	: 10.30 am – 12 pm (Duration: 90 minutes per session)
<hr/>	
THE BRIEF	
There are <u>two</u> empty panels in the architecture of Malaysia Pavilion for Shanghai World Expo 2010. You are asked to produce a textile piece to fit the dimensions of the areas: 6 ft (width) x 4 ft (height).	
Capture the ‘ <b>Essence of Malaysia</b> ’ using any appropriate style, medium and approach.	
The design(s) can be in <u>any form</u> (abstract, figurative, geometric, pictorial, flora and fauna, patterns, etc.)	
<u>Task – 26 October 2010</u>	
PART I	
Each group is requested to spend 60 minutes brainstorming and developing ideas for the project.	
Present your initial ideas and propose an intended outcome.	

**Table 4.11.** Session One - Brief distributed to students in both Groups A and B.



Several procedures were undertaken: to make sure both groups were treated equally, the students were divided according to their previous record/grades; hence the two groups were equally balanced. Both groups included overseas students so that they were equal in influence. In this first session they were given similar tasks so that the assessors (Figure 4.51) (graphic design lecturers) could identify if either one of the groups was ‘stronger’ in Session One or whether one group made more progress than the other in Session Two. By doing so, we could identify if there was a clear difference in Session Two when the test group were to be given a ‘handbook’ as the only source of reference (strictly no internet/books) and the Control group were to work without the ‘handbook’ and continue to research and revise their initial idea (Tables 4.12 and 4.13).



**Figure 4.51.** Graphic design course co-ordinators (as assessors) and the author during students' presentation.

Project Title : Distilling the Essence  
Project Duration : 26 October 2010 – 23 November 2010  
Time : 10.30 am – 12 pm (Duration: 90 minutes per session)

---

#### THE BRIEF

There are two empty panels in the architecture of Malaysia Pavilion for Shanghai World Expo 2010. You are asked to produce a textile piece to fit the dimensions of the areas: 6 ft (width) x 4 ft (height).

Capture the '**Essence of Malaysia**' using any appropriate style, medium and approach.

The design(s) can be in any form (abstract, figurative, geometric, pictorial, flora and fauna, patterns, etc.)

#### Task – 26 October 2010

##### PART I

In groups (Group A and Group B respectively) you are required to use 60mins to brainstorm and develop ideas for the project.

Present your initial ideas and propose an intended outcome.

##### PART II

##### Method of working

Groups will be pre-arranged. Group A and Group B **must not** discuss ideas, process or share information or findings regarding this project. Doing so will ruin the intended purpose of this project.

**Group A:** Use the 'handbook' to revise your brainstorm ideas and initial proposal. You may **ONLY** use the 'handbook' as a source of reference to produce the textile piece. You must strictly refrain from using books, internet or etc. as a source of reference.

You are required to work in groups and to make a group presentation to your peers about your findings. Your intended outcome may differ (improve / alter) from the initial proposal depending on your further findings.

Present your final outcome on 23 November 2010.

##### Submission requirements:

- i. All roughs, sketchbooks and working visuals to show clearly your development work
- ii. Final outcome / mock up

**Table 4.12.** Brief handed out to Group A for Session Two.

Project Title : Distilling the Essence  
Project Duration : 26 October 2010 – 23 November 2010  
Time : 10.30 am – 12 pm (Duration: 90 minutes per session)

---

#### THE BRIEF

There are two empty panels in the architecture of Malaysia Pavilion for Shanghai World Expo 2010. You are asked to produce a textile piece for the dimensions of the areas; 6ft (Width) x 4ft (Height).

Capture the '**Essence of Malaysia**' using any appropriate style, media and approach.

The design(s) can be in any form (abstract, figurative, geometric, pictorial, flora and fauna, patterns and etc.)

#### Task – 26 October 2010

##### PART I

In groups (Group A and Group B respectively) you are required to use 60mins to brainstorm and develop ideas for the project.

Present your initial ideas and propose an intended outcome.

##### PART II

##### Method of working

Groups will be pre-arranged. Group A and Group B **must not** discuss ideas, process or share information or findings regarding this project. Doing so will ruin the intended purpose of this project.

**Group B:** You are asked to investigate and do further research. Report on how you have undertaken the project from the initial proposal.

You are required to work in groups and to make a group presentation to your peers about your findings. Your intended outcome may differ (improve / alter) from the initial proposal depending on your further findings.

Present your final outcome on 23 November 2010.

##### Submission requirements:

- i. All roughs, sketchbooks and working visuals to show clearly your development work
- ii. Final outcome / mock up

**Table 4.13.** Brief handed out to Group B for Session Two.

In Session One, the students' task was to use 60minutes to brainstorm and develop ideas for a project. The brief was to produce a textile piece for the dimensions of the areas: 6ft(width) x 4ft(height) to fill two empty panels in the architecture of Malaysia Pavilion for the Shanghai World Expo 2010, capturing the '*Essence of Malaysia*' using any appropriate style, media and approach. The design(s) can be in any form (abstract, figurative, geometric, pictorial, flora and fauna, patterns and etc.)

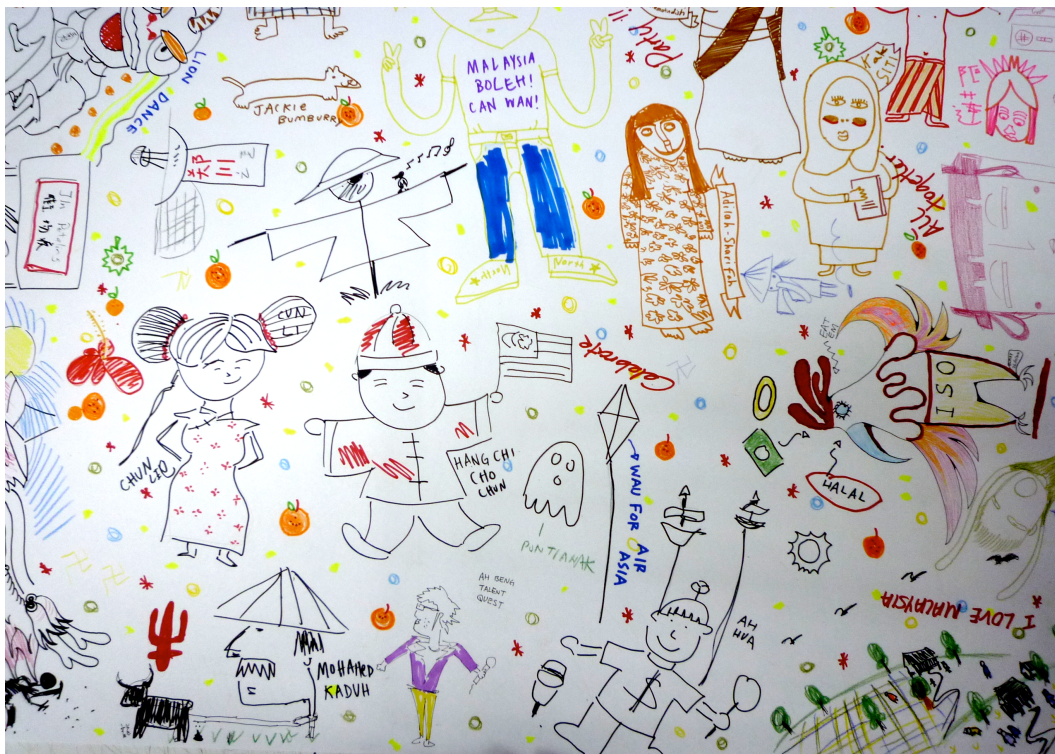
Their presentations:

Group A used icons to reflect Malaysia. Each student in the group expressed their own feelings about Malaysia through their illustrations. The art direction was 'random' and in a 'child-like' style. They characterised their 'people of Malaysia' with local names. Indian dance, Chinese culture (traditional costume, lion dancers and lanterns), national icons/elements, Malaysian characters (e.g. Upin)/cartoon designs were among the many things juxtaposed together as elements representing Malaysia (Figures 4.52 and 4.53).





**Figure 4.52.** Session One - Group A during brainstorming session.



**Figure 4.53.** Session One - Group A's illustrations.

Group B's approach was to represent Malaysia's multicultural and 'colourful' aspects. They used colourful dots to form Kuala Lumpur's cityscape in the foreground. In the background, the fireworks represent festivities while the *wau* (Malaysian moon-kite) represents traditional values. Their second design piece was inspired by Lat (Malaysia's renowned cartoonist). Elements representing Malaysia included an orang utan, a kenyalang (hornbill) and Malaysian icons, including P. Ramlee (an icon of Malay entertainment), Tunku Abdul Rahman (first Prime Minister, also known as the Father of Independence) and M. Nasir (a Malaysian poet, singer-songwriter, composer, producer, actor and film director), the three main ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian), typical Malaysian food and the national flower, hibiscus (Figures 4.54 and 4.55).



**Figure 4.54.** Session One – Group B presenting their initial ideas.





**Figure 4.55.** Session One – Group B with their initial design.

Session Two was set approximately 1 month after Session One, which provided enough time for thought processing and for the students to develop their ideas. The students were required to work in groups and to make a group presentation to their peers. The outcome could differ (through improvisations and/or alterations) from their initial proposal in Session One. Session Two began with presentations from Test Group (A) and Control Group (B) (Figures 4.56 and 4.57).



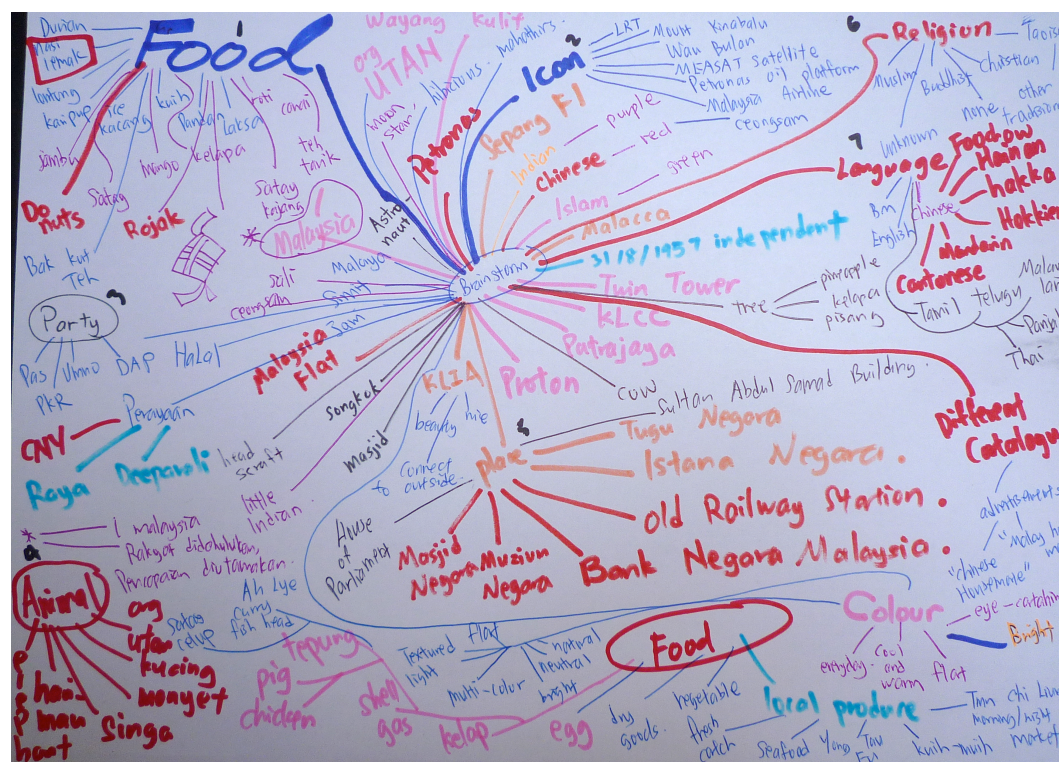
**Figure 4.56.** Session Two – Group A presenting their ideas and outcome, in reference to the handbook provided.



**Figure 4.57.** Session Two – Group B presenting their ideas and outcome.



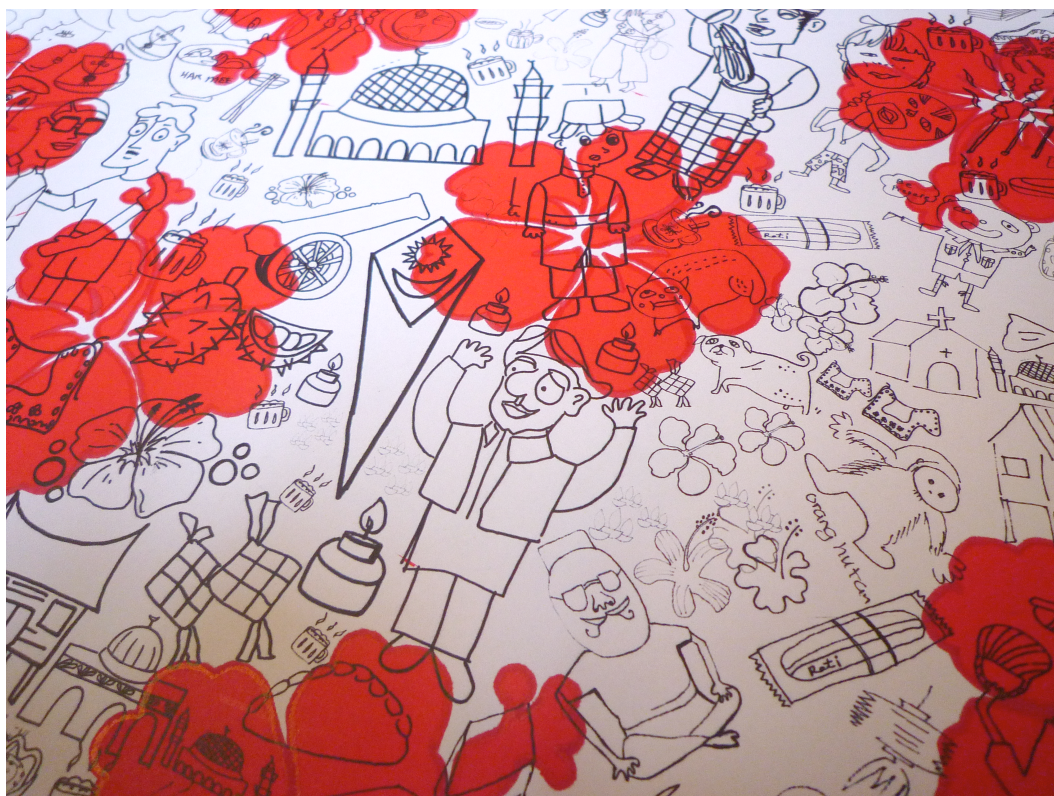
With the handbook as the only reference source, Group A started their research by reading the book in a 'linear' manner. They divided the subjects/themes in the book and had a 'brainstorming' session (Figure 4.58).



**Figure 4.58.** Group A's brainstorm – Among them were food, icons, architecture, parties, animals, religion, languages and colour.

The students commented that they were inspired by the images and icons in the handbook; they subsequently re-developed their initial concept targeted at children with a 'Children are our future' theme. The illustrations were simplified drawings based on images and icons. The textile pieces consisted of hibiscus flowers and national flag motifs with overlaying characters to portray different emotions and feelings (Figures 4.59 and 4.60). Also, details of national identity markers such as national buildings, the durian, local snacks can be seen derived from the guidebook. The visual pieces used a colour palette inspired by the red national flower, and the red, blue and yellow of the national flag.





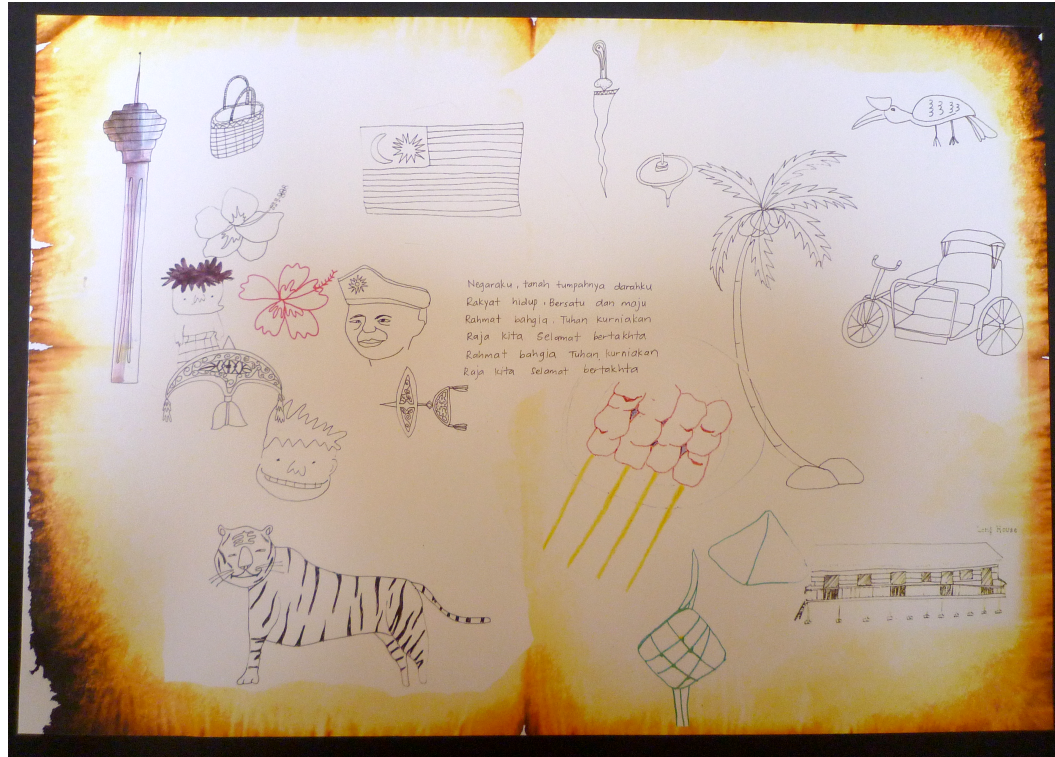
**Figure 4.59.** Group A - Textile piece with hibiscus motif.



**Figure 4.60.** Group A - Textile piece with national flag motif.



Without any restrictions on research resources, Group B further investigated the ‘spirit of Malaysia’. They re-developed their initial proposal from Session One. Their theme was about the ‘Past and Present’. Keeping the ‘dots’ concept, it showed the development of Malaysia in the Cyber Age (Figures 4.61 and 4.62).



**Figure 4.61.** Group B – ‘Past and Present’ concept.



**Figure 4.62.** Group B – Textile piece using 'dots' concept.

In Session One, Groups A and B both showed ideas and sketches developed from the brainstorming session. At this point, there were not many reflective thoughts and most of the visual representations were clichés. It was observed that most of the students have a 'conditioned' response (i.e., feeling themselves disloyal if they do not think the same) to their peers. When asked if the students faced any challenges/problems in their attempt to capture the 'essence of Malaysia', one student mentioned that the country did not have a strong heritage inherent in the culture, thus he only knows about the typical cultural icons. In comparison, in Session Two, Group A, which had the handbook as a guide, was able to refine their concept and highlight graphic elements such as colours and markers of national identity derived from the reference tool. Although Group B's concept was on 'Past and Present', unfortunately, the design was not well executed, and the visual representation did not include elements of the 'past' in particular. Critically, Part One on History and Culture, and Part Two on History of Visual Culture in Malaysia

of the handbook would have been a very useful source of reference for their chosen concept.

Following the presentations by Groups A and B, a discussion/feedback session was conducted separately with each group. While having the session with Group A, Group B were given the handbook to read for about 40 minutes. Questions and time limits were set out in the test plan that was prepared beforehand to ease the organisation of the tests (Table 4.14).

Semi-structured questions were posted to the students:

1. Were you interested in the 'handbook'? Did it change the way you think?  
(Malaysian identity/culture/heritage)
2. Was it a useful and informative tool?
3. How can the handbook be improved? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Duration and Activity	Group A	Group B
10 minutes Generic questions about Malaysia	1. What is Malaysia about? 2. What defines Malaysia? 3. What visual imagery signifies Malaysia?	
30 minutes Task	Theme: Distilling the Essence  Task: Design a textile piece that is to be featured at Malaysia Pavilion for Shanghai World Expo.	
	Given a draft of an unpublished (hand)book as a reference	Not given any reference material
30 minutes presentation (Group A and Group B)  10 mins presentation by each group and then, 5 mins Question and Answer session	Presentation of the outcome by students	
20-minute group discussion: Students were asked about the process of the task given	1. Were you interested in the handbook? Did it change the way you think?  2. Do you feel any prouder about Malaysian identity/culture/heritage ?  3. Discuss findings/feelings about the project	1. Were you interested in the handbook? Did it change the way you think? Would it have changed your presentation/outcome?  2. Do you feel any prouder about Malaysian identity/culture/heritage ?  3. Discuss findings/feelings about the project

Table 4.14. Test plan.

Participants from Group A felt that the handbook gave insights about Malaysian culture, particularly the local culture. They felt it described history in a visual way. They mentioned that the handbook provided useful design elements. It was an eye-opener for

overseas students, who had not been sure what was typically Malaysian prior to reading/seeing the book. The students commented that they were able to get a sense of Malaysia and understand more about the country from the historical development and visual culture presented in the handbook.

The Malaysian students said that the diverse and colourful content of the handbook showed the diverse aspects of Malaysian culture, which was not politicized to favour any particular ideological perspective. One student pointed out that *“History in school was in words... it was boring and I hated it! The images were brown and dull and it did not attract the audience.”* Another student mentioned that when they studied history in school, it was primarily for the sake of exams. When it came to Art History in tertiary education, the focus was upon Western and European art rather than Malaysian. By contrast, the handbook inspired them to think more about Malaysia because it was more visual; the vibrant images also captured certain emotions of everyday Malaysian life whilst also drawing upon the past. An Indonesian student found that it was interesting to find similarities between her culture and Malaysian culture, which were also evident in architecture and buildings. An Iranian student commented that the project gave her a new perspective on the considerations she must take into account when designing for a different culture.

Group A suggested that the handbook could be improved by adding captions about the historical past for the non-local audience. The content might also be expanded to include the traditional dress of the people of Sabah and Sarawak. This point can be taken further and visuals of the elements or motifs in these costumes as well as the colour theme/hues

developed, so that traditional motifs and patterns of various indigenous groups can be documented systematically for use by design practitioners. Generally, the students felt that the project was interesting because they were asked not to seek information from the Internet and only use the book as a source of information. The book was indeed very helpful as it included graphic elements derived from design artefacts which can be a useful guide for design practitioners.

Later, Group B commented that *"It was surprising that the other group (A) came up with a lot! ... the level of research is different."* The students implied that if they were given the handbook, their concept could have been enhanced. They acknowledged that their group came up with something *"safe and within the comfort zone"*. One student commented that the 'colour' section was useful and can be used as a reference colour palette for application to work relating to a particular period.

The session allowed discussion and further opinions about the book to be aired. The students felt that the 'Malaysian traits' section was particularly interesting as it centred around the unique, not ordinary or even the random. They felt that the section portrayed less typical things about Malaysia which relate to everyday life. The photographs showed *"sights and tastess"* of the nation, as one student mentioned. For example, text in the section describing the taste of *durian* or the 'noisy or chaotic' environment at the *pasar* (market) was informative to a non-Malaysian audience. The environment was explored through photographs which captured glimpses of the country's people, which enhanced the overall feel of the book.



The feedback from the student groups was positive and provided some new ideas on sections that can be included in the final handbook. Sections on banknotes, national and state flags, and icons of national heritage were later added as they enhance the content of the book as well as providing more information. The students also suggested that information provided in the book could be more detailed, such as captions or text to describe Malaysian particularities. The book was then taken to gain opinions from a group of working designers. A discussion session was conducted to further determine how to make it more valuable to design practitioners.

#### 4.3.4 Design Test II

Having trialled the design handbook with students, I then chose to test it with six professional designers working at Thinklab© in Kuala Lumpur. The team members of this organisation were ideal to work with because they are design practitioners who are enthusiastic about current design trends and issues. After the handbook was handed out to them, the session was conducted in an informal manner leaving room for the participants to give input and recommendations for the book through interaction, the exchange of ideas and conversations (Figure 4.63).



**Figure 4.63.** Thinklab© team members and the author during the discussion session.

The feedback and idea contributions from the working designers were more detailed and structured than the students' comments from the earlier sessions. Interesting and valuable insights were gained from the discussion session. The participants were particularly interested in certain sections of the handbook:

- They felt that distinctive icons and images derived from the local culture could be used in a brand system – for the Malaysian brand, and its application system. It

could be used in packaging, websites, promotional pieces or signs to enhance the visibility of Malaysian-made products for the global market.

- It was also indicated that the evolution of territory through history and time in the topographical maps was a useful reference tool that illustrated the key points in Malaysia's history.
- The endangered trades or traditional crafts, which are rich with cultural elements, can be used as a source of inspiration for design work, or when working on projects which need a cultural component.

The participants suggested:

- The content of the book can include graphic elements or patterns derived from the environment. This would further enhance the content of *A Nation's Visual Language* handbook.
- To further enhance the use of photography to capture the things that are typically Malaysian in our daily lives, e.g. typical food, people at work, school, multilingual sign systems.
- That the layout and design of the book can be improved, including dividing the book into parts covering different phases of Malaysia's development, such as the historical period, post independence and current era. Such organization would give the handbook a better structure and order.
- Consideration of visual hierarchy such as the use of colour and font to differentiate the sections and sub-sections to form a better structure for the book design.

The session which allowed the design practitioners to read, critique and comment on the handbook also resulted in several ideas being suggested that can be developed as potential design projects. Examples include identifying and documenting humorous Malaysian colloquialisms which can be used for producing media content, or publications targeted at a Malaysian audience. This suggests ways in which design can play a role in shaping cultural identities. The handbook presented together with this thesis can then be used and further steps could be taken to develop design projects that consider the role of creativity and design in shaping local culture. Local assets can effectively be explored and interpreted through design and creative practices to define a nation's brand. The idea that this handbook can be further developed through an iterative process of re-designing and re-writing by responding to feedback and ideas, and reflecting upon it again echoes the idea of a reflective practitioner (Schön,1983) as discussed in section 3.3.

The discussion session highlighted the design practitioners' concerns, which include the future direction of the creative industries in Malaysia. They commented that many Malaysian products and services, particularly those produced by small-medium enterprises, are perceived to be of low quality. This, coupled with poor brand presence, has resulted in low recognition. Thus, the participants generally hope to see initiatives that will draw nearer to achieving a standard unifying guideline for design in Malaysia. The key point made by these professional designers was taken and a *Visual Identity Guide* to brand Malaysia was developed through what I have learned and discovered from the research undertaken and information presented in *A Nation's Visual Language* handbook. The process applied to the activity of designing the *Visual Identity Guide* demonstrates the iterative process of practice informed by reflection.

#### 4.4 Malaysia: Visual Identity Guide

The *Visual Identity Guide* is a guide to the Malaysia brand, which introduces the user to the identity, visual elements and ‘tone of voice’ (of the brand). It is intended to ensure consistency in application and provide design practitioners with inspiration and direction to apply the basic elements and style to their design work and creative process. The basic elements include Identity, Typography, Colour and Imagery. The identity or brand mark should be used in the majority of corporate communication. The brand mark is developed from an existing logotype of Tourism Malaysia (Figure 4.64). The logotype were applied in tourism campaigns or used for holiday destination promotion efforts. Figure 4.65 is an example which clearly illustrates the inconsistent application of the existing identity.



**Figure 4.64.** Tourism Malaysia logotype, designed in c.1998.



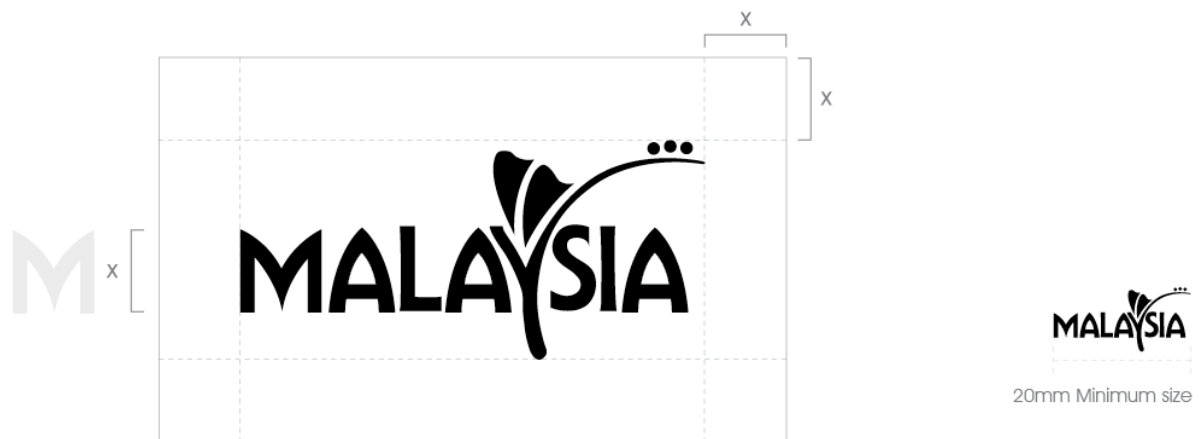
**Figure 4.65.** 'Cuti-cuti 1Malaysia' promoting destination and tourism activities, 2012.

The revisions and development were made to the existing logotype because of the potential it has from the country's name, to cover areas beyond visual communication for tourism or destination branding. Revisions were made to increase the legibility and simplicity required for the Malaysia brand (Figure 4.66). The wordmark logo focuses on the text and typeface while incorporating the element of the national flower, hibiscus. The existing colour of the '3 dots' was replaced with yellow – one of the prominent (primary) colours of the brand identity –as it represents the stigma, a distinctive characteristic of the national flower, hibiscus. The wordmark logo is suitable because it focuses on name recognition, where the country name is distinctive but not (yet or entirely) well known. This allows the brand to be communicated clearly and directly. The guide will assist design practitioners in the consistent use of visual identity that will enhance a positive reputation for performance and brand promise.



**Figure 4.66.** Brand mark for Malaysia's nation brand.

The identity is flexible because it can be used in a range of sizes, but is recommended that it not be smaller than 20 mm. To ensure that the identity stands out, it should at all times be surrounded by a clear space, as indicated by 'x' (Figure 4.67).

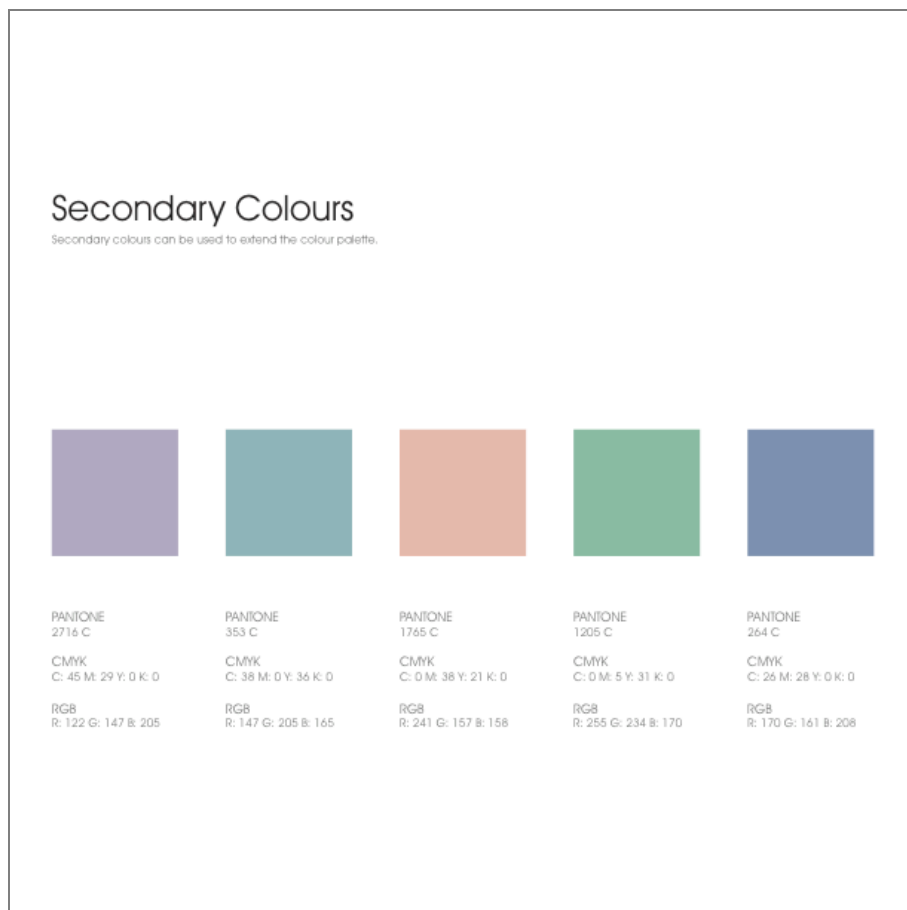


**Figure 4.67.** Brand mark's exclusion area and minimum size.

Several typefaces that work effectively with the identity have been recommended. The typeface must have clean lines and appropriate geometry, because it allows the identity to stand out for clarity and contrast when communicating in a variety of forms.



Red, blue and yellow are primary colours for the brand identity. Derived from the national flag of Malaysia, according to Razif Nasruddin and Zarul Zulkhurnain (2011), the colour red represents willingness, boldness, valiance and persistence in facing challenges, blue represents unity, through obedience and peace, and yellow represents loyalty towards king and country. The use of core colours will help achieve consistency and increase impact in all communication. The secondary colour palette was inspired by colours of the Malaysian banknotes (Figure 4.68), also presented in *A Nation's Visual Language* (Figure 4.69), which are distinctly part of Malaysia. This demonstrates the idea of the *Visual Identity Guide* as a visual summary, distilled from the research undertaken and presented in *A Nation's Visual Language*.



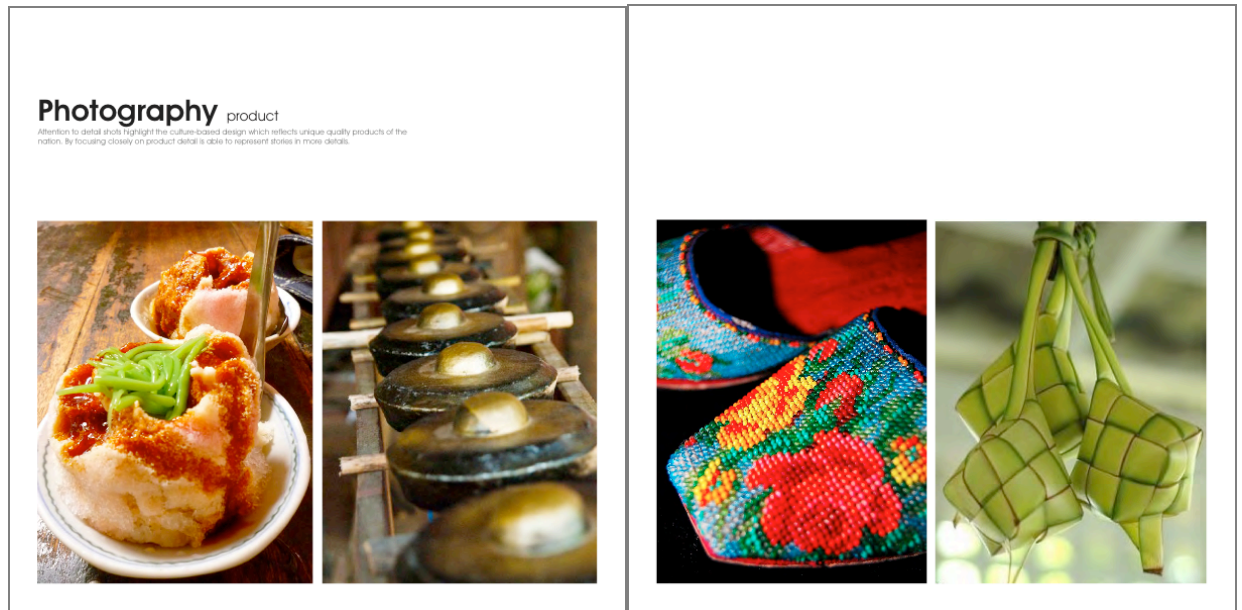
**Figure 4.68.** Secondary colours – in *Visual Identity Guide*.





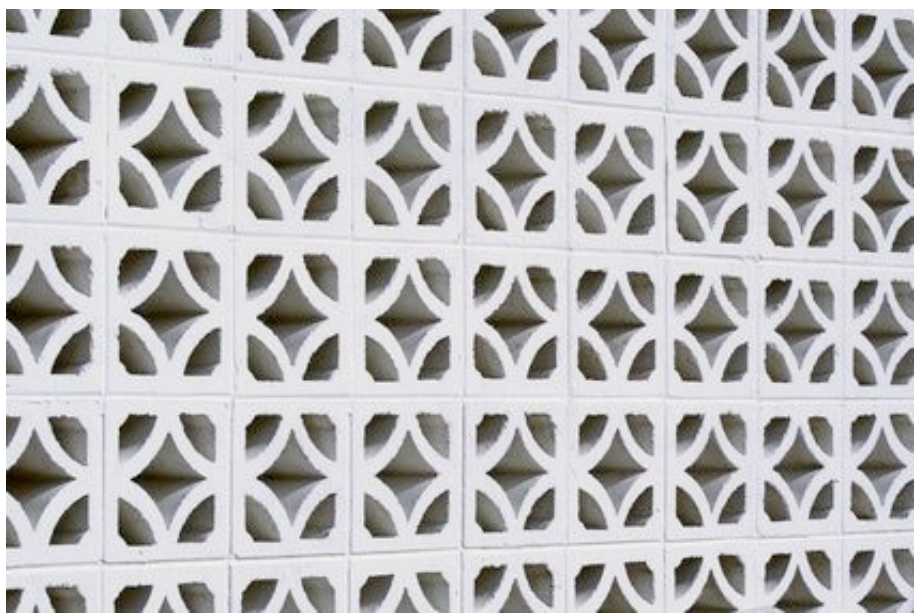
**Figure 4.69.** Banknotes: Colour by period and year issued – p.78–79 of *A Nation's Visual Language*.

Photography helps the audience connect with the Malaysia brand. It should enhance and capture the essence of Malaysia. The subject of photos include people at work / in action which highlight moments of inspirational glimpses of the unique. The photographic style should be inspiring in the interpretation of the product, the people, nature / environment and distinctive architecture. The focus point for photographers is the human face (hero shots), object, nature scenes and lighting (Figure 4.70).

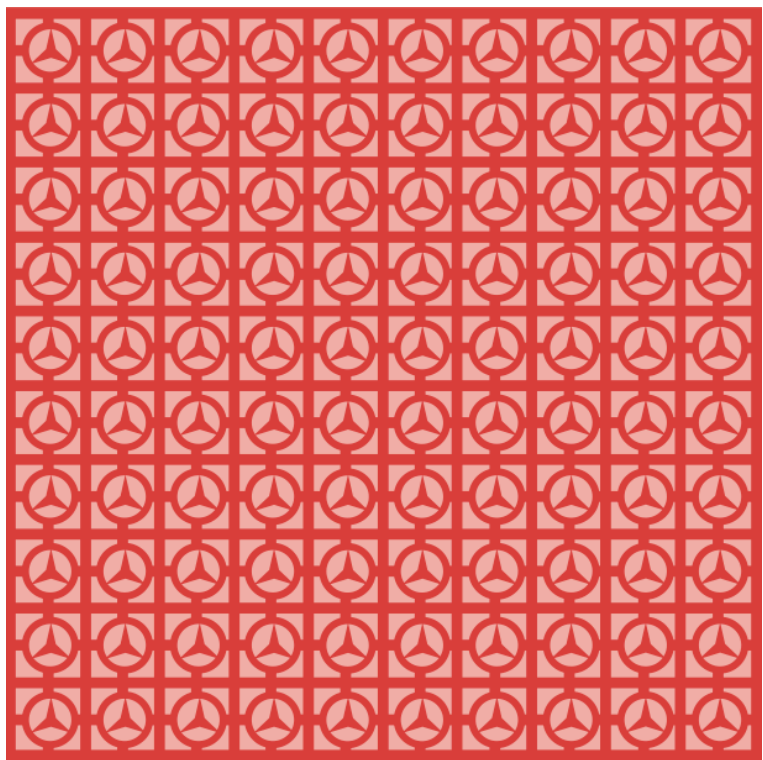


**Figure 4.70.** Photography: product – in *Visual Identity Guide*.

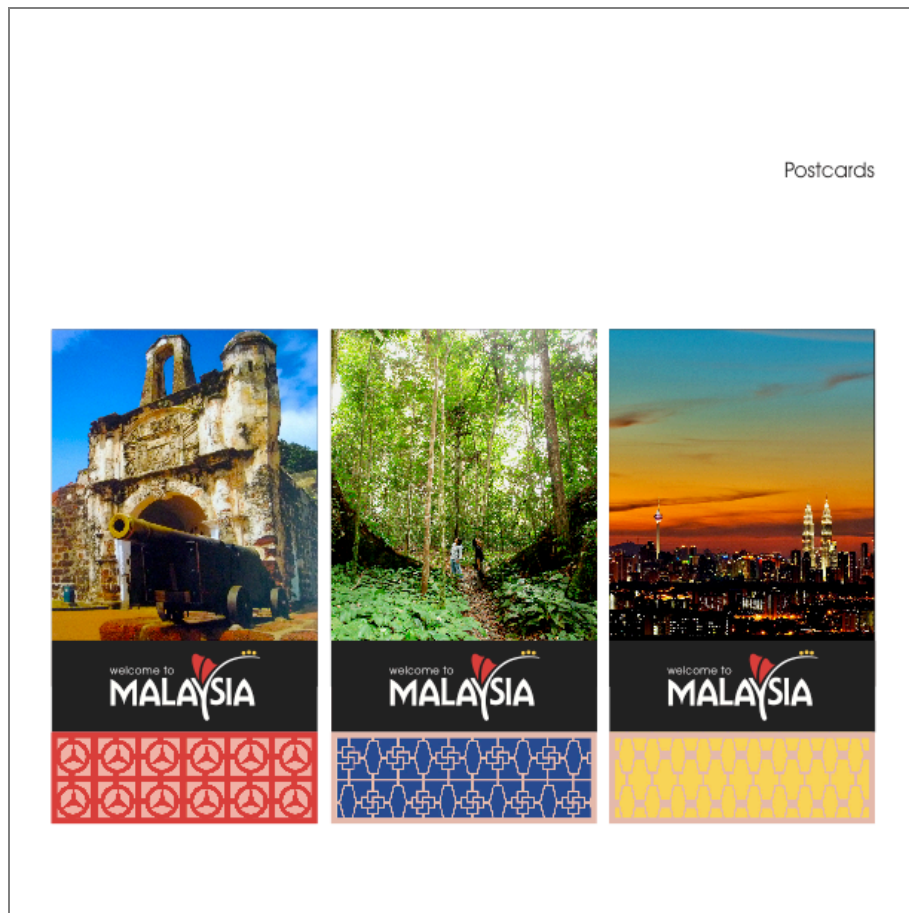
Patterns are derived from decorative vent blocks (Figure 4.71), a common feature in Malaysia's built environment, which also function as an important aid to cool the house in Malaysia's moderately hot tropical weather. Vent blocks are hollow bricks moulded in pattern and form. The graphic patterns (Figure 4.72) are not only unique but also versatile, and can be applied as a secondary branding in promotional materials, products, publications, and more (Figure 4.73).



**Figure 4.71.** Decorative vent blocks, a common feature in Malaysia's built environment.



**Figure 4.72.** Graphic patterns as secondary colour scheme – in *Visual Identity Guide*.



**Figure 4.73.** Application examples: Postcards – in *Visual Identity Guide*.

The visual identity guide is developed through the process of extracting and interpreting the visual research informed by *A Nation's Visual Language*. In order to select the basic elements for Malaysia's brand, the process required involves evaluating the appropriateness and the purpose of the identity, typography, colour and imagery for the brand. It considers consistency of look and feel, Malaysia's traits, and the core brand value and design that can be applied across a range of media and communicated through products and/ or services. This brand mark has the potential to be flexible and it reflects the warm welcoming essence of Malaysia. Incorporating the national flower of Malaysia, the hibiscus symbol, enhances the graphic identity. The guide enables different agencies, communication companies, designers, web developers to implement the identity in their work.

This visual identity guide was then further tested through providing it as a reference tool to students working on a packaging design project for local products. The test is reported in Section 4.4.1.

#### **4.4.1 Design Test III**

For a third test of the value of my visual identity guide, I returned to working, using a different project brief, with Level 3 graphic design students at a private institution in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. Students were given copies of the visual identity guide to use in their 1-week design project titled ‘Packaging Design Does Matter’. The brief stated:

Your task is to improve the product image through a redesign of the packaging design for the local snacks/delicacies, which has been provided. This redesign can be a general re-envisioning of the packaging to be marketed locally or internationally, or could be specifically for national festivities, that reflects the essence of Malaysia’s visual identity. You are encouraged to use the basic elements that highlights Malaysia’s nation brand. Use the brand guidelines booklet, which has been provided. (Appendix 5)

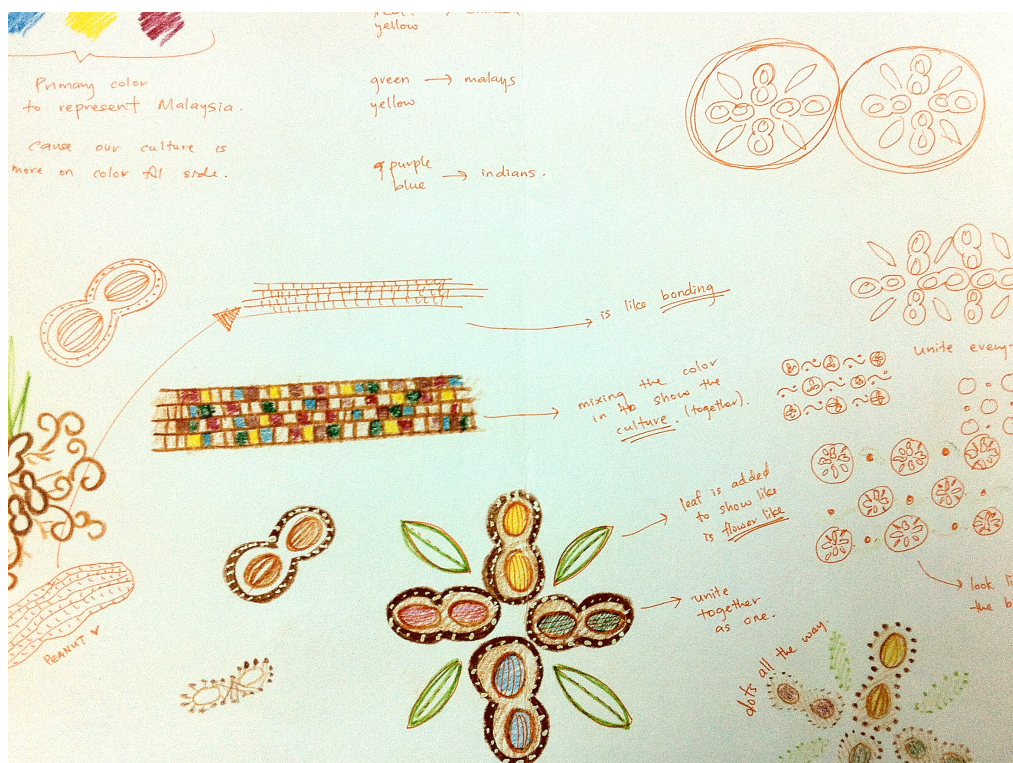
The guidelines were used as a supportive tool in their creative process. Discussion with students thereafter highlighted:

- The guidelines were useful as a source for reference to highlight “the essence of Malaysia’s visual identity”, in particular for a project that challenged them to re-package a local product within a short period of time (1 week).
- Responses from the questionnaire surveys (discussed in section 4.1.4) that was included in the booklet also assist its users to reflect upon the nation’s brand values. The core brand values were used as a key direction, and proved to be an inspiration for the project. As one student mentioned, the values were used as a



direction for the development of her packaging design project.

- The colour palette derived from the national flag and banknotes was inspirational for branding local products. One student mentioned that she felt that the distinct colours reflect Malaysia's identity, and are a useful guide for designers to promote Malaysian made products.
- The patterns were inspirational and applicable in their design process. They felt that the use of patterns that are reminiscent of traditional elements could be one way of enhancing the 'country of origin' effect and it inspired them to develop patterns for their product packaging (Figure 4.74). Figure 4.75 reveals their proposed design outcomes.



**Figure 4.74.** Pattern development in student's sketchbook



**Figure 4.75.** Design outcome for product packaging project

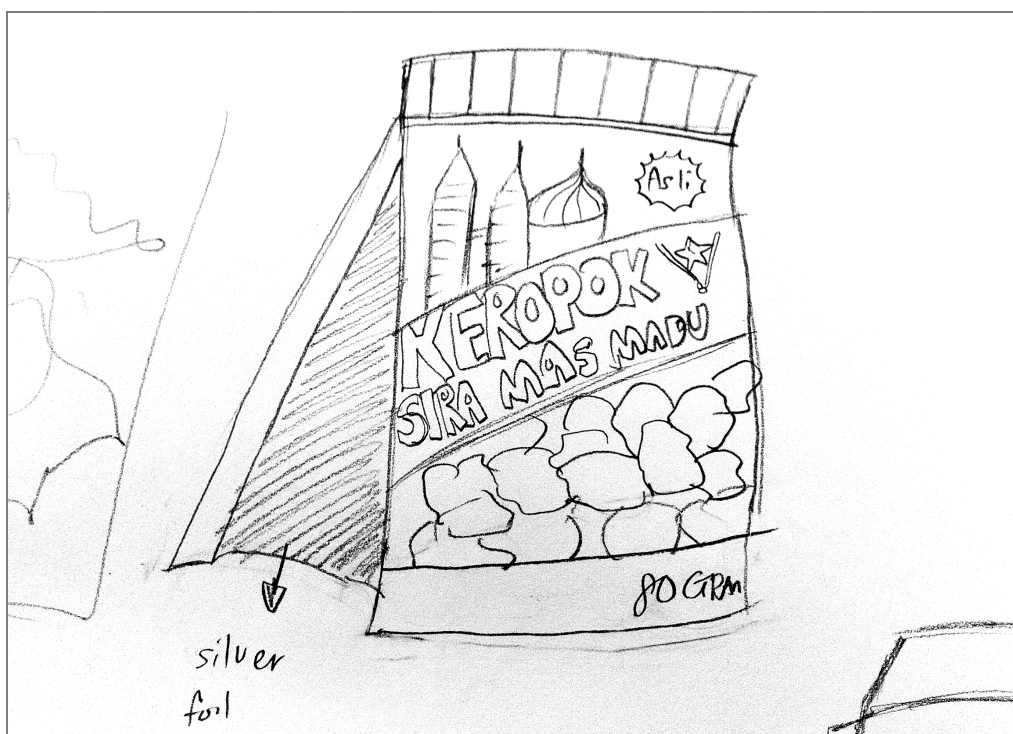
It was also observed from the students' sketchbooks that many ideas were developed through the brand guidelines, including exploring the country's cultural elements. As examples, Figure 4.76 shows the development of patterns derived from textiles, and figure 4.77 shows the sketches for the packaging design, which includes the national icon of the Petronas Towers.

The outcomes of the test reveal how the visual identity guide can assist and provide direction to a range of stakeholders, particularly design practitioners, in their design work. The distinctive brand values can be translated into a visual reflection of Malaysia's nation brand. This visual identity guide can be use in conjunction with the longer and more detailed *A Nation's Visual Language* guide book.





**Figure 4.76.** Development of pattern design derived from textile designs, in student's sketchbook.



**Figure 4.77.** Development of packaging design for local snack, which includes the icon of the Petronas Towers, in student's sketchbook.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion**

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The idea of 'nation branding' raises diverse and complex issues that this investigation has examined by using a variety of different disciplinary approaches. The topic has required the examination of national identity and globalization, the consideration of colonial and postcolonial government policies, the identification of certain national characteristics through critical review of visual evidence, the interviewing and observation of graphic design practitioners in their native environment, and developing collaborative design tools by reflective means, including testing and reviewing them with potential users. In conclusion, it appears that emerging nations are not in a position to ignore the promotional opportunities promised by nation branding activity, but they run the risk of failing to promote themselves effectively if they cannot develop appropriate means of identifying those characteristics which truly make them stand apart from other nations. The challenge identified by this research is to consider how designers working in emerging nations can develop effective processes for managing nation-branding projects that are genuinely useful to their countries, rather than hollow exercises that repeat standard design practices which have a relatively low impact on their audience.

The research has revealed that there are limits to the usefulness of some of these investigative methods, and some are more valuable to graphic designers than others. It has been argued that it is essential for graphic designers to gain a fuller understanding of globalization and glocalization since they impact directly on the ambitions of a nation-branding campaign. However, such campaigns cannot be built solely upon that appreciation, any more than they can be built solely upon a recognition and appreciation of the nation's cultural history. A proper understanding of the requirements of nation branding also involves understanding the mindset of government and state agencies, and the ways in which local designers think and work. Yet, as revealed by the cultural probe

techniques employed, gaining an insight into these attitudes does not in itself enable local designers to develop more effective nation-branding practices. The most promising approach from this research has been that developed for the visual identity handbook and guide, which aims to direct its designer users into design research activities that concentrate their attention on those features that truly characterize the unique characteristics of a nation. It is worth pointing out that the first comprehensive index of postgraduate research theses in art and design in the United Kingdom (ADIT) includes a large component of practice-led research in art and design that emphasizes reflective practice. The practical elements of this thesis then fit much more closely with that tendency, in proposing an approach to nation branding where the research process has been developed from a designer's point of view and its primary audience is graphic design practitioners. The research process has highlighted potential methods and considerations for designers to further explore the ways in which the act of continuous reflection and practice can develop valuable design outcomes. It demonstrates that such reflective approaches can be carried out through a collective process of developing a common document by a continuous process of reflecting, amending and improving. This action of 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1983) can be compared to the activity of workers in other fields, such as surgery, where surgeons improve quality of performance in their workplace by systematically developing and collecting sets of notes and records that can be developed and improved by successive team members who benefit both from reflecting upon their own experiences and those of their colleagues and predecessors. This method has also been applied in design-related fields such as architecture; the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Australia has established a programme to promote local and international architectural culture through practice-based research. The research programme invites architects with a body of work demonstrating mastery to reflect upon the nature of that mastery and speculate on future practice through

design, and through commissioning of innovative local and regional architecture buildings.

## 5.1 Highlights of the Findings

In respect of the various debates about globalization, many companies with global brands have attempted to use a standard, uniform approach to advertise, design or brand their products or services to be implemented everywhere and anywhere. In the case of the principal case study, Malaysia, the pressure applied by global brands on Malaysian consumers creates a sense of the superiority of imported products; thus, designers and practitioners are inclined to follow ‘outside’ (Western or Japanese design styles or trends) practices, which lead to a lack of innovation and creativity, and to a lack of personal or national voice/identity. As in many other emerging nations, Malaysian clients often want to imitate European, American or Japanese design ‘styles’. This phenomenon of ‘me-tooism’ (the practice of imitating the work or ideas of others) may also be seen to contribute to a lack of a collective Malaysian identity. This is reflected and reinforced in the working methodology and design styles of many local designers and companies which uncritically adapt their design practice to Western values, without much concern for their own traditions or much interest in challenging the homogenization of global practice.

As described in Section 2.5, Malaysia’s historic background, or the lack of awareness of it, is an important issue with regard to the lack of published or archived material about the art and design heritage of the country. Like other postcolonial states such as India, where most art and design history is borrowed from the West, the traditional Hindu and Muslim art was sidelined to make way for an imported British syllabus intended to train a generation of ‘copyists’ who churned out European-style watercolour studies for military officers. The local approach was suppressed, while favouring styles associated with Western naturalism, implying that the Indian taste was inferior. The insecurity amongst

Indian artists was deeply rooted and there was not a strong sense of identity or self-belief, partly due to the pressure to believe that 'West is Best' (Rigley, 2006).

However, as discussed in Section 2.2 and Section 4.1.5, in both India and Malaysia businesses have found it more valuable to translate global brands into 'glocal' products or services that contain local meanings which are culturally relevant to local populations. In the increasingly competitive global market, design plays an important role in adapting, reflecting and producing products or services that respect local or cultural differences. A sensitivity to local differences, customs, languages, colours, and consumer behaviours has a symbolic meaning within our visual culture. Together with other influences, these details can be used to develop a positive nation brand – a strong visual language with national characteristics is significant when seeking to gain brand differentiation in the global marketplace; in other words, for the nation to stand out externally or internationally and as an economic commodity. As shown from the interviews, design practitioners are increasingly aware of the potential of paying greater attention to local insights and knowledge that play an important role in design and branding. This would not only suit local communication and tastes; it would also show consideration of cultural identity, which is significant in the development of a national visual identity.

The barriers and limitations on design practice in Malaysia include government policies, which can be seen to be pushing designers and consumers in more than one direction: hi-tech modernism and yet increasing designs favoured by oil-rich Arabs. Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia) played a key role in constructing Malaysia's 'brand image' as a modern Islamic country by bringing in foreign

investors, particularly from the Middle East. This can be seen particularly in Malaysia's architectural heritage, which has been influenced by Arabicized Islam. This is prevalent in modern architecture such as Putrajaya (the new Federal Government administrative centre) and other collaborations, including the partnership of local government with large-scale multinational consortia to develop extensive urban and business developments such as the Iskandar Region (The Star, 2008) in Johor. In the process of modernization and urbanization, cultural heritage and traditions are sometimes lost due to a lack of preservation efforts (Kent, 2003). As discussed in Section 4.2, Malaysian government policy is clearly not as helpful as some others (such as Singapore) in preserving visual culture and traditions; it does not guide designers to develop the most appropriate local solutions. My research indicates the significance of cultural identity in design work and its importance towards the development of a national visual identity. It also encourages designers to understand local cultural meanings and a vernacular language of design in light of the phenomenon of glocalization.

Reflection, as a way to better understand the unique features of a local culture, is carried out through reading, writing and documenting, and is facilitated by others reading, critiquing and commenting. This naturally leads to the development of *A Nation's Visual Language Handbook* and *Visual Identity Guide*, which can be useful tools for local graphic designers. The aim of the handbook is to provide knowledge about both the nation's history and the ways in which that history and visual culture can be visualized and illustrated. In order to gain a better understanding of the national make-up, including derivations, trends and relationships, the handbook indicates visual markers such as icons of national heritage, graphic elements, photographic images, colours and symbols which are distinctive to the country.

The reflective process of developing *A Nation's Visual Language* handbook through writing and design practice provided concepts and ideas to help construct a Malaysian visual identity. The development of the handbook involved engagement with participants through several projects and tests focused on construing a national visual identity as a means of branding Malaysia in the global economy. The handbook visualizes Malaysia through time and in the present by examining graphic design artefacts, mapping the history and visual culture of the nation and portraying Malaysia in the era of globalization. The outcome shows a collection of visual information including visual culture and Malaysian traits which are unique aspects of a visual language specific to the Malaysian nation state. The handbook emphasizes the significance of valuing cultural identity and locality in the image of Malaysia rather than clichéd images influenced by Western modernity and Arabicized Islam (as previously mentioned), which is the dominant visual language of state agencies. Visuals in the Malaysian traits section demonstrate the intricate intercultural performance that takes place every day in contemporary Malaysian society, which is more likely to influence the concept of national identity so that diverse groups might become a more equal part of it. Images of culture in action are more likely to depict what it means to be Malaysian than didactic and clichéd stories preaching superficial harmony (Desai, 2006).

The handbook was developed through the iterative process of designing and reflecting as well as engaging with various participants. The content of the handbook can be updated and improved through rewriting and redesigning, with the facilitation of other participants. Design tests I and II (in Sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.4) of the prototype design tool (handbook) show that it provides design guidance and direction to design practitioners working on nation-branding campaigns, local design projects or design



work which requires a cultural component. Design practitioners can use the handbook as a resource as it provides useful and inspiring design elements, images and icons for branding a local or national product or service to be exported to the global market. The handbook, which is rich with local cultural elements, gives a sense of Malaysia through its imagery, diversity and colours. The historical evolution of the nation – perceived by many designers as boring and bland – is illustrated by means of maps which very clearly convey how the national territory has grown and contracted over time. Certain users said this visualization encouraged them to view a long period of history in a way that seemed more attractive than the ‘dull and boring’ history lessons they had experienced as schoolchildren. The book illustrates the diversity and vibrancy of Malaysia, including capturing the emotions of everyday Malaysian life through photographic imagery. The overseas students who participated in the design tests commented that the handbook gave insights about the regionality of Malaysian culture and was an ‘eye-opener’ to them as they had not previously been aware of what was typically Malaysian.

Design test III revealed that the guide is a useful supportive tool in the creative process, in particular for design projects with a tight deadline (commonly faced by many Malaysian designers). Several ideas and visual exploration of the participants’ design were inspired and developed through the use of the guide, which reveals the value it can provide in assisting and providing design direction to a range of stakeholders, particularly design practitioners, in applying the basic elements and style to their design work. The distinctive brand values can be translated into a visual reflection of the Malaysian nation brand.

## 5.2 Contribution to Knowledge

The ways in which this research contributes to knowledge are as follows:

- **It identifies the principal cultural challenges faced by graphic designers in emerging nations.**

The research shows how globalization, modernization and postcolonialism play a pivotal role in the social transformation of an emerging nation such as Malaysia. The research shows that the notion of glocalization is one of the few viable routes through which designers working in emerging nations can withstand external market forces by consciously adapting imported methods of designing and delivering products to local needs and desires.

- **It reveals how multiculturalism can present hidden barriers to the effective practice of nation branding.**

The case study of the federal state of Malaysia shows that the term ‘multicultural’ does not mean the same thing in every country. Even in another federal nation – such as the United States – the constitution does not allow the state to define the nation’s cultural and ethical values by reference to the religion of the majority population. The geographical boundaries of many emerging postcolonial nations have brought together diverse populations with different local, national and international allegiances according to their particular ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The political compromises made between these various populations in multicultural nations are seldom the same, and in many cases – such as Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Zimbabwe and South Africa – the form of the compromise is unique to that particular nation. Therefore this research shows why it is difficult to develop a

common approach to nation branding and how the attempts to import into one country an approach that has been successful in another can lead to undesirable consequences, such as reinforcing one population's idea of the nation over others. The particular case study of Malaysia reveals that its public sector is dominated by the majority racial and religious group, while its private sector is heavily dependent on employees drawn from minority racial groups. As suggested by Fenton (2003), this sort of multicultural diversity in pluralistic Malaysia is understood, but not 'embraced'. That makes it difficult for graphic designers trying to work within the government's national framework to freely investigate more effective methods for nation branding campaigns, and this research identifies the need to develop a nation branding approach that can get around such concealed barriers. The research also offers suggestions about ways in which state agencies can free designers to develop branding approaches that will more successfully promote the nation at an international, rather than a regional, level.

- **It shows the value of state archives and collections in establishing recognizable national characteristics.**

The case study of Malaysia has revealed how difficult it is to form an idea of national characteristics if the archives of cultural artefacts are not fully developed. The present Malaysia Design Archive has a relatively small number of design artefacts available for substantial analysis. It does not have significant state support and is an online initiative undertaken by an individual design practitioner and is not overseen by any national body. This means that the level of historical knowledge about Malaysia's visual history and culture, including its design history, is far lower than in younger established nations and lower even than in Singapore, a former part of Malaysia. The research shows that Singapore has a far more developed international profile than

Malaysia, and that this could be partly attributed to the much higher visibility of historical materials and archives in Singapore

- **It offers greater insight into the value of certain research methods claimed to be useful in investigating the thinking of design practitioners.**

This research has tried to investigate attitudes among graphic designers that may affect the way they approach nation-branding projects. The methods chosen were ones recently promoted by other design researchers, including adaptations of Gaver et al.'s cultural probe methods, being a participant in the observation of design practitioners at work, undertaking a questionnaire survey, and conducting interviews. The outcomes of these investigations did not reveal as much of value as has been claimed by some other design researchers. The outcomes did, however, help the investigator and her collaborators identify the need to develop a more practice-led form of research that would assist designers address the challenges of nation branding in a more practical and useful way. Therefore, the present research has helped to show how the various social science approaches are not directly useful in formulating specific graphic design strategies. However, they can be indirectly useful in identifying the kind of problems that those strategies need to address.

- **It demonstrates a new nation branding approach based on the principles of reflective practice.**

The practical element of this investigation involved the creation and development of a national visual language handbook and visual identity guide, using the example of one emerging nation as a demonstration of how to apply this type of design approach in other emerging nations, be they Oriental or Western. The manual

demonstrates to its users (whether nationals or foreigners) how they can research the nation's unique characteristics and record the results in visually stimulating and relevant ways. In accordance with the ideas of Schön and other advocates of reflective practice, this exercise of producing a common reflective handbook is one that can be shared among project team members and handed on to subsequent teams. It is an approach specifically tailored for application in emerging nations with complex histories and diverse populations, where colonization has interrupted the sense of historical continuity and folk memory. In particular, the books seeks to provide exercises that will inspire its users to explore the national identity more closely and represent it more creatively in ways that challenge received wisdom and overused clichés.

### 5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

- **Recommendations for graphic design practice in Malaysia**

The investigation of graphic design practice in Malaysia has indicated that further research can be undertaken to assess which graphic forms are most communicative. This can lead to recommendations about how cultural knowledge can assist graphic designers working on localized graphic design projects to express their national identity better than any 'borrowed' imagery or design styles. A resource documenting local knowledge derived from working in partnership with cultural advisors or traditional craftspersons can be built upon to develop methods that can affirm national identity. This area of research will benefit multicultural global establishments where knowledge on how global design standards can be translated locally can be shared between local and international counterparts.

- **Recommendations for policy makers in relation to the national governmental framework**

The weakness of the structure of the Malaysian framework has indicated flaws, which deters the development of a national brand identity for the country.

Recommendations in Chapter 4.2 are made in order that the findings can facilitate policy makers, academics, graphic design practitioners and professionals in the creative industry. This study proposes that policy makers position the Malaysia Design Council as the national strategic body governing all matters on design. It recommends important features and strategies to be adopted by the design council as it was found that the governmental framework does not correlate with the visions of the country suggested to help develop a nation brand. Therefore, further research

examining and evaluating government ministries and establishments should be given a more prominent focus when developing national design policies.

- **Recommendations afforded by the handbook and guide booklet**

The evaluation of its effectiveness through a series of reflective practice, observations, interviews and discussions with students and working designers has contributed towards the handbook. Testing the handbook in an educational setting has provided some insights on its applicability. Recommendations for future work would include the further development of the handbook for graphic design practitioners. The handbook in its current form was derived from an evolving process, and will be progressively improved as more reflection and tests are carried out. Possible themes relating to the nation's visual language can be further developed to be included or expanded from the content of the book.

Although the handbook has gone through a process of 'distillation' to develop it beyond its use as a reference tool to a visual identity guide which serves as Malaysia's brand guide, the time constraints of this study did not permit testing it within actual design establishments. However, Test III and discussions with graphic design students have indicated the potential of the guide. Further evaluation will be needed to study the effectiveness and additional requirements needed to make certain decisions to gain validation of the concept and visual identity (internationally and nationwide).

The method of reflective practice has undoubtedly contributed to the refinement of the books in a way that it continually improved. This method can be adopted and extended beyond this study's conclusions.

- **Recommendations for a Malaysian nation brand**

The brand guidelines created for Malaysia presented with this thesis is an ongoing working document. When working with any brand guidelines for a nation, concept applications in the guidelines can be updated to reflect any changes when the brand develops. Policy makers can then reflect upon the continual development of the handbook which sets a basis for discussion. Further research can eventually achieve conclusions on what the Malaysian brand could be, how it should be valued and how the brand could be marketed internationally.

The research undertaken contributes towards the knowledge of nation branding as a specialist area in graphic design, particularly with respect to emerging nations that have lost large parts of their pre-colonial identity and have, in some cases, tried to create postcolonial identities that do not connect entirely honestly to their pre-colonial past. It highlights potential methods for research in similar areas for other emerging nations. The research provides a voice for the design community in Malaysia by analysing both national culture and the national design framework. The discoveries made through my connection and engagement with design practitioners, government officers and the local environment have given me a rich and invaluable experience. The process of researching, designing, writing and reflecting has developed new knowledge within the scope of my project while fostering personal growth in my own design practice, teaching and research practice. I observe that it is a challenging yet significant role for designers to play a part



as “*cultural affirmer and identity provider*” (Aldersey-Williams, 1992, p.16) for nations. The evolution of this research project has allowed me to constantly reflect and discover new possibilities when informing people about past, present and future direction of Malaysia through my own cultural ‘ingredients’. The combination of creativity, education, the working and living environment as well as my national and international influences enabled me to develop and share a greater understanding of the world in which we live.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1:

**Contact email/message asking graphic designers to participate in a ‘Creative Task’ for Cultural Probes**

Hi (name),

I am currently working on a project, which requires graphic designers to take part. I would like to ask for your help to participate.

Instructions and tools will be provided and it will only take an average of 10 minutes a day for a week of your time to complete several creative tasks.

Please let me know the type of company you are working at, the size of your company and how many other graphic designers work there.

I will send you the package by post or if we arrange to meet!

Regards,  
Debbie Gan

## Appendix 2:

**Sample of questionnaire distributed at Kuasa Power Asia Design Conference,  
Kota Campus Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur on 8 August 2009**

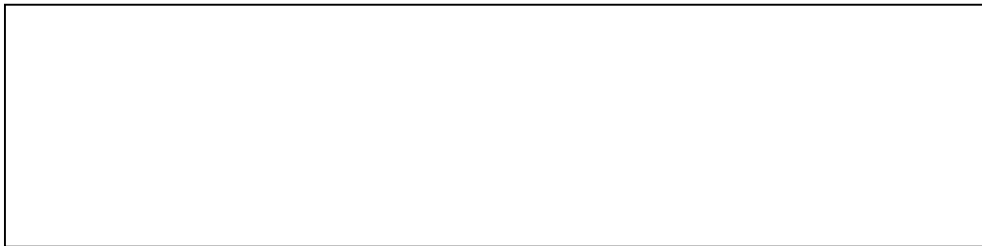
Please fill in this survey and return to the organisers during break time, or at the end of the conference. Thank you for your participation.

Age :  
Occupation :

1. Do you care whether Malaysia has an international identity?

Not at all      A bit      Don't know      Quite a bit      Very much

2. Draw two things that say Malaysian Identity to you.



3. Name two things that signify Malaysia and the culture.

---

4. Please indicate (✓) who determines the Malaysian Identity

- \_\_\_\_\_ Government and policy makers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tourism Industry
- \_\_\_\_\_ Private organisations
- \_\_\_\_\_ Local and Independent filmmakers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Design Practitioners (carry out design or design related work)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Music Scene
- \_\_\_\_\_ Others; please specify \_\_\_\_\_

5. Name 5 brands that significantly represent Malaysia.

- i)
- ii)
- iii)
- iv)
- v)

6. Please describe how you think Malaysia should portray itself internationally.

---

7. If you had a choice between an imported and a 'Made in Malaysia' product, which would you choose?

Imported / 'Made in Malaysia'

8.

a) If you choose imported product, why?

---

b) If you choose the 'Made in Malaysia' product, why?

---

9. In a typical day to day life as a design practitioner, I \_\_\_\_\_ incorporate Malaysian (or local) vernacular / cultural elements in my design work:

Never                      Seldom                      Sometimes                      Often

10. If there is a toolkit on Malaysian Design or a 'Brand Malaysia' handbook, how likely are you to apply it to your work?

Very Unlikely      Slightly Unlikely      Uncertain      Slightly Likely      Likely

\*\*\*\*\*

**If you have enjoyed doing this survey and would like to participate further, or just to chat, please leave your contact details.**

---

## Appendix 3:

### Interview guide approach – email sample

#### Doctoral Thesis - Proposed Meeting

>> -----Original Message-----  
>> From: Ian Davies\_Iskandar Abdullah [[mailto:iand\\_@mac.com](mailto:iand_@mac.com)]  
>> Sent: Thu 3/18/2010 3:43 AM  
>> To: Gan, Debbie  
>> Cc: Aniza Intan Noordin  
>> Subject: RE: Doctoral Thesis - Proposed Meeting

18 March 2010 03:43

Dear Debbie

I suggest we meet on Thursday, March 26 at 10.30 am at the ArcRadius office.  
However, this may be subject to change as we are on standby to make a major presentation to a client from next Tuesday onwards.

Thank you for your briefing notes detailing the subjects you would like to discuss.

I suspect that I may not be able to help you very much when we meet.

I can certainly brief you on the role of MRM, the Malaysian Design Council, where I have been a Council Member for the past 3 years.

However, until recently, MRM was under Sirim and MOSTI and was very much focussed on product design.

We are currently in the process of redefining MRM's role in supporting the government's objectives as we move towards a knowledge economy.

However, to date, we have never discussed MRM's role in shaping the national identity, nation branding and national visual identity.

You may be aware that the MRM Chairman, Y Bhg Professor Dato' Dr. Ahmad Hj. Zainuddin, background is graphic design.

I think you will find that there are other parties, that are close to the government, that are taking leadership in this area!!!

From my perspective, as someone who is heavily involved in interior design, architecture and furniture design, I may be able to assist you in other ways.

Please confirm if you still want to meet.

Kind regards  
Ian

Ian Howard Davies @ Iskandar Abdullah

Managing Director  
ArcRadius Consulting Sdn Bhd  
managing change by design

On Wednesday, March 17, 2010, at 06:05PM, "Gan, Debbie" <[debbie.gan@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:debbie.gan@ntu.ac.uk)> wrote:  
Hi Ian,

I am free to meet anytime on these days, next week:  
Tuesday, 24/03/10  
Thursday, 26/03/10

Friday, 27/03/10

Topics that I would like to discuss include national identity, nation branding, national visual identity and strategy contributing to nation building.

1. Visual Identity manual for Malaysia. Has anybody tried to do this? Is there one (a guide on how to portray Malaysia to the outside)?
2. How do we define national identity? Or can we define that? What are the issues surrounding it?
3. What are the government/design council's initiatives towards nation branding/building a national identity?
4. I intend to identify key symbols (things which are uniquely to Malaysia). These mix of things/people/culture/etc., which are both imported and indigenous, how can we separate these things?
5. Is there possibility of participating/collaborating on any project, which are related to my work with the design council?

Thank you for the map and directions. Looking forward to meeting you next week.

Thank you.

With regards,  
Debbie

Debbie Gan  
Postgraduate Researcher / Hourly-Paid Lecturer  
University Graduate School, Art & Design and Built Environment  
Bonnington 211,  
Nottingham Trent University  
Burton Street  
Nottingham NG1 4BU  
Mobile: +44 (0)784 6148949  
Malaysia Mobile: +6 012 637 0400  
Email : debbie.gan@ntu.ac.uk

>-----Original Message-----

>From: Ian Davies\_Iskandar Abdullah [[mailto:iand\\_@mac.com](mailto:iand_@mac.com)]  
>Sent: Mon 3/15/2010 2:01 AM  
>To: Gan, Debbie  
>Cc: Aniza Intan Noordin; Ian Davies  
>Subject: Doctoral Thesis - Proposed Meeting

Dear Debbie

It was good to briefly talk with you last Saturday at the ThinkLab conference.

I would be pleased to meet with you and discuss how I can assist you in your doctoral thesis.

I have copied this email to my colleague, Aniza Intan, as I will ask her to assist me in this matter.

I would request that you email or sms me (hp 012 21 21 864) with a proposed time & duration for our meeting and a short briefing on the topics that you would like to discuss. As my diary is quite full, it would be preferable to give me several options on the time for our meeting.

The meeting would be at my office in Setiawangsa - I attach a PDF with address, map and directions. As ArcRadius is next to the Setiawangsa LRT station, you may find it easier to use public transport to travel from your family home in Subang.

Kind regards  
Ian

Ian Howard Davies @ Iskandar Abdullah

Managing Director  
ArcRadius Consulting Sdn Bhd  
managing change by design

Designers Builders Project Managers

"..building partnerships ..  
designing success ..."

**To:**

Gan, Debbie

**Cc:**

Aniza Intan Noordin [aniza.intan@gmail.com]; Ian Davies [ian.davies65@gmail.com]

**Attachments:**

~gettoarcradius.pdf (58 KB)[Open as Web Page]

15 March 2010 02:01

You replied on 17/03/2010 08:33.

Dear Debbie

It was good to briefly talk with you last Saturday at the ThinkLab conference.

I would be pleased to meet with you and discuss how I can assist you in your doctoral thesis.

I have copied this email to my colleague, Aniza Intan, as I will ask her to assist me in this matter.

I would request that you email or sms me (hp 012 21 21 864) with a proposed time & duration for our meeting and a short briefing on the topics that you would like to discuss. As my diary is quite full, it would be preferable to give me several options on the time for our meeting.

The meeting would be at my office in Setiawangsa - I attach a PDF with address, map and directions. As ArcRadius is next to the Setiawangsa LRT station, you may find it easier to use public transport to travel from your family home in Subang.

Kind regards  
Ian

Ian Howard Davies @ Iskandar Abdullah

Managing Director  
ArcRadius Consulting Sdn Bhd  
managing change by design

Designers Builders Project Managers

"..building partnerships ..  
designing success ..."

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## Appendix 4:

### Initial survey on design policy in Malaysia by researcher Dr. Gisele Raulik – email

From: Gisele Raulik [<mailto:GRaulik@designwales.org>]  
Sent: Tue 8/19/2008 4:26 PM  
To: Gan, Debbie  
Subject: RE: Debbie Gan from NTU

Dear Debbie

Thanks for your e-mail and your interest. Please find attached a copy of my presentation and my paper presented in Sheffield.

I've checked the responses I received to the survey. Unfortunately the ones received from Malaysia were requested to keep the contact details confidential so I cannot pass you the contact. Sorry.

However, I can share the content of the responses. Here is the data collected about Malaysia.

1) Please tick the option(s) below that reflect what currently takes place in your country:

- ☒ design promotion programme(s) for raising the awareness of design
- ☒ design support programme(s) for helping companies to make better use of design
- ☐ design centre (with space for events and /or exhibitions)
- ☒ design museum
- ☐ tax incentives for the use of design
- ☐ credit/financial support for the use of design by businesses
- ☐ other - Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

2) Who financially supports the activities in design promotion? (Please tick one or more options as appropriate)

- ☒ Government
- ☒ Industry
- ☒ Academic (universities and design schools)
- ☒ Design community (professionals or professional associations)
- ☒ Non profit organisations
- ☐ other - Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

3) Who is responsible for running the activities of design support and promotion? (Please tick one or more options as appropriate)

- ☒ Government
- ☒ Industry
- ☒ Academic (universities and design schools)
- ☐ Design community (professionals or professional associations)
- ☐ Non profit organisations
- ☐ other - Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

4) In your country which ministry or government department is responsible for developing design-related policy for economic development? (please tick one or more options as appropriate)

- ☐ Economy
- ☒ Education
- ☒ Culture
- ☒ Trade and Industry
- ☐ other - Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

5) Is there a policy for design in your country? (Please tick one correct answer)

- ☐ Yes
- ☒ No, not that I know
- ☒ It is being developed
- ☐ There is a policy written but it is not practised



\_/ \_ There is no specific policy, but design is part of other development policies (e.g. innovation policy)  
\_\_\_ I don't know

I find difficult to give you a response about 'the differences between Malaysia and UK in terms of national design policies' because I don't have an in depth knowledge about Malaysia.

Sorry I cannot help more. If one day I have the opportunity to explore it further I will get back to you.

Meanwhile, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards

Gisele

Gisele Raulik-Murphy  
Senior Researcher

Design Wales  
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UWIC  
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UK

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F: +44 (0)29 2041 6970  
<http://www.designwales.org.uk>  
<http://www.seedesign.org>

*Gan, Debbie*

*Sent Items*

14 August 2008 14:09

Dear Gisele,

It was great listening to your presentation at the DRS last month. I really enjoyed your interesting presentation.

I spoke to you briefly after your presentation. I mentioned that i just began my PhD and i am from Malaysia; i am interested in the notion of universalism vs. cultural difference within the practice of graphic design. I am keen to know more about what are the feedback you got from the person you contacted from Malaysia. and what are the differences between Malaysia and UK in terms of national design policies that effects design practice. If you dont mind, could i see you ppt. presentation as well?

Thank you so much.

Warmest regards,  
debbie

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Email : [debbie.gan@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:debbie.gan@ntu.ac.uk)

## Appendix 5:

### 'Packaging Design does Matter' project brief used for Design Test III

Project Title : Packaging Design does Matter

Project Duration : 24 – 27 September 2012

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#### Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate a personal intellectual engagement with the subject and show the ability to evaluate and synthesise secondary and primary sources.
- Align Personal working processes with current professional thought and practice
- Use appropriate visual language and media for specific design activities
- Apply a professional attitude to independent learning, project management, and make effective visual and verbal presentations.

#### Aims of the project

- To develop your skills with branding and packaging
- To develop your abilities with 3D form
- To enable you to apply graphic design principles in both 2D or 3D
- 

#### Background

Malaysia still packs many of its products, especially food-related items, in outdated packaging that renders it uncompetitive on supermarkets. Through latest branding techniques, low-end products are given a high-end status and transformed into items sought for its elegance and quality. Today, branding has become a powerful buzzword that there is so much confusion in the marketplace as to what it really means. Branding is mistaken for advertising and the brand itself is certainly not the product, it is far more than that. Good branding relies on good products, which Malaysia has plenty of and therefore the need to promote them vigorously through branding is a challenge for SMEs in the country.

Five seconds is all the time it takes for a consumer to glance across a supermarket shelf. An arresting design will entice the buyer to reach out and take the product out to read what is on the packaging. A compelling sell will persuade the buyer to make the decision to buy it. Studies have shown the value of a product soars four times higher with good packaging than one without.

Malaysia is known for its wide selection of Asian flavors, iconic food and people with exotic tastes. With the right blend of packaging Malaysian edible products have the potential to become good revenue earners for the country. With the right and consistent use of Brand Malaysia, Malaysia's local products have the potential to be world-class brands with the right touch of branding and packaging.

#### The Brief

Your task is to improve the product image through a redesign of the packaging design for the local snacks/delicacies, which has been provided. This redesign can be a general re-envisioning of the packaging to be marketed locally or internationally, or could be specifically for national festivities, that reflects the essence of Malaysia's visual identity. You are encouraged to use the basic elements that highlights Malaysia's nation brand. Use the brand guidelines booklet (CD), which has been provided.

\*Students are required to work in groups of 4

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